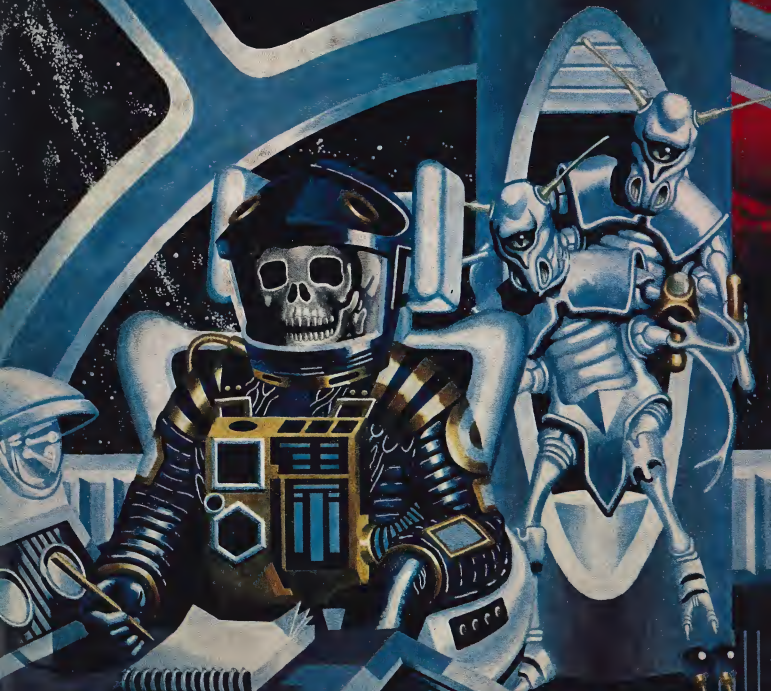


VISION

OF TOMORROW

MAY 5/-



The Ghost Sun

J.R.Fearn & S.J.Bounds

Plus · Harding · Bulmer ·

KULLEN

VISION OF TOMORROW

Editor:
PHILIP HARBOTTLE

Publisher:
RONALD E. GRAHAM

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EDDIE JONES

Cover painting by:
KEVIN CULLEN
illustrating 'The Ghost Sun'

THINGS TO COME . . .



MUSICALE . . .

Sydney J. Bounds spins a fascinating tale of a subtle and horrifying alien invasion—and of the desperate struggles of a lone survivor. Fine stories by E. C. Tubb, Bertram Chandler, Harold G. Nye and others are featured in our next issue, on sale June 2nd.

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EDITORIAL

Full Circle

Some time ago I received two items of mail on the same day—one was a ms. sent me by Walter Gillings, the other an unsolicited painting by a young artist. Gillings, following his discovery of an unpublished story by J. R. Fearn (see last month's editorial), had continued digging into his records in search of mss. of similar interest and value. He had discovered another Fearn ms. which was an unfinished story of 1,000 words. Its incompleteness was deliberate—it was conceived as the first instalment of a round robin serial that was to be completed by other British writers of the day, in a new fan magazine, *Future Fiction*, to be co-edited by Fearn and Gillings. Subsequently, Fearn was obliged to shift his home from Gillings' neighbourhood and the planned magazine and serial never materialised (although Gillings himself did later produce another magazine, *Scientifiction*).

The fragment was interesting, but its incompleteness precluded it from any consideration for publication—until I examined the unsolicited painting. It showed a skeletal spaceman sitting immobile in front of his spaceship control panel, whilst investigating aliens were boarding the derelict through the airlock. Startling enough—but what was even more startling was that this painting was a perfect illustration of the story written some thirty years earlier! The artist, Kevin Cullen, had never seen the story or even knew of its existence—yet he had created an exact rendering of Fearn's story. To stretch the coincidence still further, he, like Fearn, was a Lancastrian.

An editor's task in putting out an issue is not such an easy one that he could pass up a situation like this—so

I promptly contacted one of our most popular authors, Syd Bounds, and invited him to complete the story.

It appears on page 57 of this issue, and is, of course, illustrated on the cover. Sometimes fact can be just as strange as science fiction!

The rest of our present issue resulted purely from the hard work and skills of the authors and artists involved, in which coincidence played no part. Yet here again I believe we have something singular, and equally noteworthy, with the publication of *THE CUSTODIAN*, by Lee Harding.

I'm not referring to the fact that the story has been illustrated by the author (a professional photographer before becoming a writer) though that is notable enough. No, what is particularly interesting and exciting about this story is that Lee Harding created it with a specific goal in mind—and I believe he has achieved that goal in a singularly brilliant manner.

Lee sat down to create a science fiction story that was wholly derived from the rich heritage of his own country of Australia. In *THE CUSTODIAN* he drew on his own environment and culture, adding to it his own knowledge of human nature and the special imagination of a science fiction writer. The result is one of the best stories we have printed. Lee is at present working on a sequel, which promises to be equally memorable. It's something to look forward to—in *VISION OF TOMORROW!*

Philip Harbottle

LOST IN TRANSLATION

PETER CAVE

I'm going to tell this story . . . and I don't give a damn whether it breaks security regulations or not.

I want to get the whole affair out in the open for once and for all. I've been all but accused of mass murder, I've spent four months in a rehabilitation centre for mentally disturbed spacemen and I've been permanently grounded by InterSpace.

So here's the story . . . how it happened, and as it happened. Believe it if you want to, laugh at it if you want to. I don't care any more.

Up until my compulsory 'grounding' three weeks ago, I was a fully active crew member of InterSpace. I've been a spaceman for six years, and never faulted on a mission before. My last trip was the Delta 4 Expedition in the InterSpace vessel 'Newtonian'. I brought it in for a crash-landing on Lunar 7 singlehanded as the sole survivor of a disastrous expedition.

That much you know already.

Newtonian lifted off from Lunar 2 with a full complement of seven officers and 12 crewmen. We were under what is known as 'flexible orders' . . . that is, we were primarily sent out to scout the Delta chain, and make a landing if we felt such action was justified.

'Newt' was a good ship—a happy ship. She was one of the most up-to-date in the InterSpace fleet, having been fitted out with the improved Polinsky-Venn drive modifications just before the trip out.

We hypered about seventy thousand miles out from destination, because we wanted to go in slowly and take full spec readings. (That's short for spectroscope, in case you're not up with technical terms).

Anyway, we cruised in real easy for about five days, and it wasn't long before most of us realised we were headed for a pretty strange place.

There were 19 experienced spacers aboard that ship, and we'd crewed together and we'd crewed apart. Between us, I reckon we'd landed on a good couple of hundred planets and travelled well over a couple of dozen light years.

And there wasn't one of us who had ever seen a planet chain which didn't register on the goddamned spectroscope.

You know as well as I do that the old moon is just about as dead as any lump of space rock could be . . .

but at least it shows up minerals and things. Well the Delta chain just didn't give us a single blip. Nothing! It was almost as if the place we were going didn't exist at all.

We closed right in to camera range and covered the chain for visual. It's called a chain, but it's really more like a three-dimensional asterisk. There are seventeen planets of differing sizes, all revolving round a peculiar structure of three suns and a white dwarf.

We spent nearly a whole month closing in on every single planet and satellite, and throwing every known test at it.

. . . Yet we still never picked up so much as a squeak on our equipment.

It was really weird. Our eyes told us that the damned place existed, yet our instruments told us with scientific precision that it didn't.

Only the cameras couldn't lie.

It was the photographic close-ups of Delta 4 which made the captain decide to go in for a landing. Like I said, we were on flexible orders.

Every law of logic told us that no form of life could possibly exist on that planet chain . . . yet something had to explain the markings which showed up clearly on the pictures of Delta 4.

Delta 4 was the fourth largest planet in the chain . . . about three-fifths the size of Earth. And right smack across its surface were these lines. Almost perfect geometric lines and shapes.

They didn't look natural . . . but every rule in the book told us they couldn't possibly be artifacts. They were very similar to the markings on Mars—which our ancient astronomers once thought were canals. That was before we found that they were just ridges of magnetic dust.

Captain Schreiber reckoned we ought to go in and take a look, so a democratic vote was taken by all officers.

The vote said yes to a landing—by 5 to 2.

So we went in.

It was the louisiest, stinkiest landing I've ever known . . . and I've seen planetfalls on well over thirty unknown planets. It wasn't the captain's fault. I swear there isn't a spacer in the entire service who could have expected a planet to be so murderous.

We got a 0.25 gravity reading until we were about 30,000 feet off the surface . . . and then something approaching 6G seemed to grab suddenly at the ship and pull her down like a stone.

The surface came up to hit us like an atomic hammer . . . and what should have been something approximating Earth was harder than diamond and several times more dense.

We lost five men in that landing. Jones, the radio officer, Palack, the cook, Mann and Nijinsky were smashed right out of their safety harnesses and Ngunta had his intestines forced through his anal passage by the impact.



I don't suppose you know much about InterSpace rules and regulations, so I'll just go over the basics for you.

First, the cardinal rule is that nothing goes outside the ship for at least five days after planetfall.

... Which is pretty sensible, if you think about it. There is always the possibility of some form of life. It could possibly be hostile. So you wait to see.

Secondly, there is always the question of bacteria to be considered. Anything in the ship—even if it's only a piece of metal—has been in indirect contact with Man ... through the air inside the ship. Man carries bacteria. If anything went outside the ship, those bacteria stand a fair chance of slipping through the sterilization process and being loosed in an atmosphere in which they are completely alien.

The five days aren't usually wasted. On any normal planet, the ship's instruments can take readings and make tests on atmosphere, humidity, rock structure and things like that.

In our case, there was nothing to do but sit back in a crippled ship and twiddle our thumbs. We couldn't even go outside to check on damage to the exterior hull.

On the fourth day we saw it ... or them, I still don't really know which.

Second mechanic Bright saw it first. Within a few seconds of his warning shout, we all crowded round the observation window.

The strange geometric markings we had seen on the photographs had not been in evidence when we landed. Now, as we looked, a dead straight furrow was appearing in the surface of the planet and it was heading in a straight line for the ship.

It wasn't too easy to judge distance, but I reckon it was heading for us at well over a hundred miles an hour.

Someone muttered 'surface subsidence'—and that seemed as logical an explanation as any. As it came closer, we could see clearly that the furrow was more of a deep fissure. It was easily forty feet wide, and certainly big enough to swallow the ship.

We watched it coming for us and prayed to long-forgotten Gods. At least, I know I did. There didn't seem to be a hope.

About fifty feet from the ship it stopped dead.

Suddenly the entire ship shook so violently that we were all thrown to the floor. By the time we had picked ourselves up and looked outside again, the thing was halfway out of the ground.

There just isn't any way to describe it. It didn't seem to have any definite shape or form. It didn't even have a colour—not by any standards that we know. It almost wasn't there at all ... that's about the only way I can even attempt to describe it. First it was like a cloud of gas, then it wasn't. First it seemed to be taking shape and then it wasn't. I had the feeling that it didn't have any form at all, but was trying to create one out of nothing. There was only one thing we all knew with cold certainty.

The thing was alive.

It was crazy, but we all realised we were looking at a living creature. Here we were, on a planet which didn't have a single mineral, gas or chemical which registered on an Earth spectrometer, and now we were faced with something which lacked any recognisable matter at all.

Yet we sensed ... no, we *knew* instinctively ... that the creature was a life form such as no man had ever seen before.

The captain decided to play it by the book, and the InterSpace manual says 'Attempt Contact'. We pulled out the regulation samples ... metals, chemicals, fibres, proteins and things like that ... and ran them through the ultra-violet sterilizer. When they were clean, we put them out through the airlock.

... And waited!

The creature didn't move for nearly two hours. When it did, it hovered, floated, oozed—I can't describe it—over the samples for about twenty minutes.

Suddenly, it disappeared as fast as it had come, ploughing back the way it had come through the subterranean passage it had carved out of the surface of the planet.

We pulled in the samples again. Only the protein and natural fibre samples were gone. Everything else was untouched, and as perfectly sterile as when it had gone out.

Which meant that we had passed phase one of the alien contact routine with flying colours. We could now safely proceed with the next stage.

Two men went outside the ship for the first time and set up the loudspeakers and translating equipment. Pretty shrewd little gadgets, those translators, when you think about them. They can take any logical pattern of sounds, numbers, movements or smells and convert them into the equivalent of human speech.

When that was done, we had to think about disposal of our dead.

The rule book only gives one procedure for disposal of bodies ... consignment to space. Only we weren't in space, and we couldn't keep five corpses in a re-cycling atmosphere for much longer.

The captain decided to send out a burial party, but the idea was fated from the start. Nothing short of an atomic bomb would have made so much as a scratch in the surface of that damned planet. We could only assume that the creature ploughed through it by some means of molecular breakdown.

We didn't have much choice. The five bodies, decked out in their InterSpace ceremonial uniforms, were laid gently into the deepest part of the fissure made by our strange visitor. The captain said a few words, and we covered the corpses with a large flag. And that was that.

Time dragged by. It was nearly three days before the creatures came back. This time, it came to within ten feet of the hull. We set the translators and radio equipment in action.

We blared out messages for hours. The creature gave little or no response—which was only to be expected. How could it possibly hear verbal communication,

when it had practically no form, let alone hearing organs? Yet it stayed around, as though it sensed we were trying to make intelligent contact.

It looked like stalemate . . . but then came the breakthrough.

The creature got through to Jacobs, the radio operator. He was acting perfectly normal one second, and the next he was seized with what seemed like a cataleptic fit. His whole body became stiff as a board, his face turned the colour of fine cigar ash and his eyes glazed over.

After about two minutes, his body sagged and he collapsed in a dead faint.

When he came round in the medical room, his face was jubilant.

'Telepathy', he said. 'They communicate by telepathy . . . but they are having trouble with us because there are no common images to transfer.'

We had all come across telepathic life forms at some time or another. Usually, however, the creatures were sufficiently humanoid to share certain images and ideas. With this creature, it wasn't going to be so easy. We had nothing in common with it, or its environment. Even the matter which made up the surface of its planet was completely alien to us . . . and we to the creature.

Telepathy can only be achieved when there is a starting point of common ground . . . so that a rapport of thoughts, concepts and ideas can be gradually built up.

We tried concentrating on single objects and ideas, but it just wouldn't work. Then Jacobs had another fainting fit.

This time, he was out for over an hour. When he recovered, he was still a little bit shaky, but he smiled grimly.

'For some reason, I seem to be more sympathetic to the creature's thought waves than anyone else's,' he announced. 'The creature has given me the germ of an idea . . . and I don't quite know if I got the message right. I have the feeling that it wants to use me as a sort of medium . . . shunting thoughts and ideas through my brain like a converting mechanism.'

The captain wasn't too keen on the idea.

'What you're suggesting could be dangerous,' he pointed out. 'I certainly can't ask you, or order you, to place yourself in that position of risk.'

'But you wouldn't stop me volunteering?' asked Jacobs with a grin, and the captain smiled grimly back.

A few minutes later, we knew we were getting somewhere. Jacobs went into a trance-like state, and we recorded his brain-waves on an electro-encephalograph. Definite patterns soon appeared and were repeated over and over again.

As time passed, the number of patterns grew in volume and complexity, and the captain figured it was about time to connect up the ECG to the translators.

It worked a treat. As soon as the translating machine had broken down the patterns, it fed them through the computer unit and converted them into audible speech.

We soon had the common words we wanted: Life, Living, Creatures, Friends, Peace, Travel.

That was when I had my bright idea. I should have kept my big mouth shut.

Why didn't we do the whole thing in reverse? I asked. If the creature could send thought impulses through Jacobs to our loudspeakers, then surely we could convert broadcasts through the same medium into thoughts for our alien friend.

The captain asked Jacobs if he was willing, and he nodded happily.

'I'm getting quite interested in things,' he replied with a grin.

The idea worked well. Within a few minutes we had a two-way conversation going with the alien over the radio. At first it was just an exchange of very simple ideas and words, but the alien learned at an absolutely incredible rate, and was soon putting whole sentences together.

The captain decided to educate the creature, and we pulled out all the education tapes. First, we fed it the alphabet, and simple arithmetical tables. The alien assimilated them in minutes, and informed us that it wanted more.

We fed it everything we had . . . philosophy, higher mathematics, Geology, Chemistry, physics, Literature, Astronomy . . . everything. The alien learned in a few hours what it takes an intelligent human being a whole lifetime to learn.

Then, without a word, it broke contact and shot away. Jacobs came out of his trance, and crawled into the rest room for a well-earned sleep. The alien didn't re-appear that day.

Next morning, the look-out informed us that we had visitors. A deputation, no doubt, I thought as I looked out of the observation window and saw six of the aliens wavering about outside.

The captain connected up the equipment and Jacobs plugged himself into the conversation converter.

'Hello Earthmen,' came the clear message over the radio.

We responded with a collective greeting of welcome.

'We want see,' the alien's spokesman informed us.

It sounded as though they wanted a formal meeting outside the ship. The captain and two crew members went out through the airlock and confronted the group of aliens.

'No . . . we want all see,' said the creature. 'All see. More on ship. We want all see.'

The captain's voice came in over the intercom.

'It looks as though they want us all to come out of the ship,' he announced. 'Only they don't know that it means breaking one of the rules in the book.'

We knew what he meant. Rule six, subsection three: 'At no time shall an InterSpace vessel be left unattended with less than three responsible personnel aboard.'

The aliens had started to chant in unison now.

'Want see. All see. All see outside ship. We want all see'. They went on and on, without a break for several minutes.

When the captain spoke again, his voice was grim.

'Somehow, I don't think these fellers give much for InterSpace rules,' he said. 'They seem to have made up their minds what they want, and I don't think they are going to be satisfied without. It looks like we're going to have to break the rules for once. I get the feeling that they might turn nasty if we don't do as they say'.

One by one, we put on our pressure suits and went out through the air-lock. Two of us had to carry Jacobs outside to satisfy the aliens.

When we were all outside, the aliens dropped their repetitive chanting, and the spokesman took up the conversation again.

'Good. Now we have all see. See is good. We like see. We like all see. You bring see. See good. We thank you.'

Now I'm not the brightest guy alive, but I was beginning to have a very nasty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The words they were saying just didn't seem too right. The alien had learned more than enough to conduct an intelligent conversation, without pidgin English.

... Unless it was saying something completely different to what we thought it was.

You know how different meanings, and nuances of thought can be lost when you translate from one language to another? Well this was more than a simple translation... this was a conversation from one complete situation to another, radically different one... and a similar thing could be happening.

The creature kept up a contented-sounding burble while my thoughts raced.

'We like see you bring. See is good. We like see'.

I was edging my way back towards the ship even before my thoughts assembled themselves. Maybe I've just got a naturally nervous disposition. In doing so, I passed close to the edge of the fissure, where we had placed the bodies of our five crewmates. I glanced down... and I didn't like what I saw.

Suddenly, my abstract fears became immediately and frighteningly tangible. The whole picture leaped into my

mind with horrifying clarity.

I just looked at that disgusting puddle of brown fluid at the bottom of the fissure, and remembered the last few education tapes we had played to the alien. Advanced chemistry and physics.

At the same time I realised why nothing had shown up on the spectroscope, I knew that there had been a basic flaw in my idea to convert telepathic thought into audible sound.

Sound is phonetic by its very nature... and phonetic words have a nasty tendency to become muddled with others.

I screamed at the top of my voice and ran for the air-lock.

'Run. For God's sake run for it'.

I was the only one to make it. I was nearest.

As I hit the airlock, I glanced over my shoulder. Only the captain was left alive, running like hell towards the safety of the ship. As I watched, the nearest alien surrounded his fleeing figure, and he disappeared into a glistening puddle of dirty brown fluid.

I closed the airlock, made for the control panel and punched the emergency autoflight control before I strapped myself into my flightcouch.

I didn't come to again until 'Newtonian' crashlanded on Lunar Base 7 some three days later.

... So that's the story. So far no-one has believed it. They think it's space sickness.

I can't make anyone realise that the lives of an entire spaceship crew should be sacrificed just because of a little slip in translation.

But that's what it was. The aliens wanted 'See'... but they didn't mean see, look, envisage. They'd read our chemistry tapes... and they meant 'C'... the chemical formula for carbon.

Our alien had tucked into the bodies of the five dead crew members and developed a taste for carbon-based matter.

We were all a walking form of exotic food to them... like a present of caviar from the skies.

So like I said... laugh if you want to. You can believe or disbelieve my story.

I'm past caring.

Readers' Reaction

E. C. Tubb emerged as the winner in our third issue, as determined by reader response, and wins our bonus of £10. The reader whose votes most nearly tallied with the final result was M. S. Brierley, of Yorkshire. The four most popular stories were:

1. LUCIFER by E. C. Tubb,
2. PEOPLE LIKE YOU by David Rome,
3. THE NIXHILL MONSTERS by Brian Waters,
4. THE ADAPTERS by Philip E. High.

Coming next issue . . .

BITTER PILL

by A. Bertram Chandler

MUSICALE

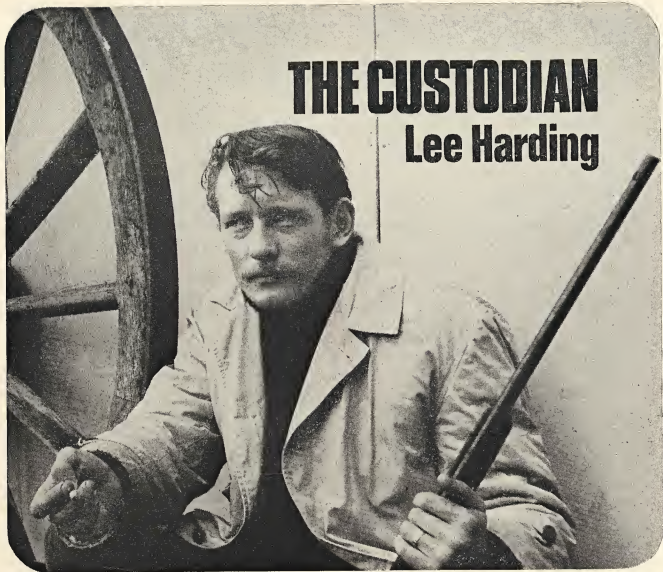
by Sydney J. Bounds

plus other great stories and features.

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THE CUSTODIAN

Lee Harding



From one of Australia's top science fiction writers comes this haunting story of the aftermath of a global catastrophe that is as frightening as it is plausible . . .

Bleeker waited until the girl had almost reached the porch steps before he moved around from the side of the house.

'That's far enough.'

She didn't panic. Only a momentary flicker of surprise flashed in her eyes as she turned to face him. She saw the rifle in his hands and she froze. It was pointing directly at her waist.

He took a step forward. 'Were you looking for anything in particular?'

She inclined her head towards the house. 'My grandparents lived here.'

'Oh.' He allowed his rifle to sag so that it looked less menacing. 'Well, I'm sorry to hear that.'

They regarded each other distrustfully. Bleeker walked cautiously towards her and took the holstered pistol from her waist and then stepped back.

Her control impressed him. This was no fey young girl but a capable woman already versed in the grim techniques of survival. But the accusation in her eyes distressed him.

'I didn't kill them, if that's what you're thinking. The house was empty when I found it.'

She seemed to accept this, and it concerned him to see the way her shoulders slumped suddenly as if her grim defiance had all but ebbed away. In an instant she became an unhappy and lonely little figure dwarfed by the surrounding forest.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them. The weight of the rifle had become an embarrassment to Bleeker and he slipped the safety catch back on and walked casually up the porch steps.

He paused outside the door and turned around. She had not moved from her position on the pathway and was studying him with curious, uncertain eyes.

'You look tired,' he said. 'Come inside and have a drink if you like—or I could get a quick meal going if you're hungry.' His offer sounded clumsy but it would not manifest itself in any other way. He had been isolated so long from the blackened mainstream of the world that conversa-

tion had become a forgotten activity.

She didn't answer.

He shrugged. 'Suit yourself.' Sometimes the distrust of this grave new world cut very deep.

He went inside and straight into the kitchen and parked the rifle in a corner. He shoved the girl's pistol under his belt and started some coffee. A little while later he heard a noise behind him and turned around. She had followed him inside and she now stood in the middle of the main living room. She was watching him through the open doorway and she did not seem afraid—only nervous, and that was understandable.

He managed a smile. 'Won't be a moment.' And he nodded to where the percolator had already begun to bubble furiously on the gas stove.

Most of his own uneasiness had vanished by now. She didn't look like a predator or act like a psychopath and he looked forward to the possibility of a genuine friendship. It had been a long time since he had enjoyed the luxury of human company.

He poured the coffee into two deep mugs and took them out into the other room.

She was standing in front of the ornate fireplace. Her mind seemed to be miles and years away and she took the proffered drink and held it cupped between her hands, soaking in the warmth through her fingers.

'Thank you.'

He did not push the conversation. Instead he sat down on the arm of one of the deep lounge chairs and studied her out of the corner of his eyes.

At some time she had been rather pretty—but the past had been unkind and had coarsened her attractiveness into hard and almost unfeminine lines. She was probably in her early twenties but looked much older.

She was dressed for travel: a heavy maroon sweater and dark gray slacks made her sex ambiguous from a distance. Only the mousey blonde hair pulled back into a severe pony-tail, and nestling against her deeply sun-tanned neck, suggested femininity. Once she might have seemed petite; now her small frame verged on being skinny. A puff of wind might have tumbled her over. But underneath this fragile exterior he could detect an uncommon strength; and she moved with the cautious grace of someone who has been for much too long in flight from something best forgotten.

'My name's Bleeker,' he said. 'Carl Bleeker.'

Something in his awkward sincerity managed to reach her. She dragged her mind away from the past and looked at him. 'Deirdre.' Her words were almost a whisper. 'Deirdre Ashton...'

There. It was done. Now the beginnings of acceptance and friendship began to flow between them.

He wondered, guiltily, what she would think of the Japanese prints he had hung around the walls of the main room, and if she would be offended by the Van Gogh print of *The Sowers* he had placed above the fireplace where the family group photograph had once been suspended in its vulgar brass frame—and all the other changes he had brought to this house she had once known in a time before this.

'You come far?' he asked.

'Perth.'

She said this casually, as though it was of no real importance. Yet he looked surprised.

'Across the Nullabor?'

She shrugged. 'Is there any other way?'

No, there wasn't. But her courage staggered him. To have traversed a continent, to have crossed more than a thousand miles of desert with the possibility of help in any emergency too remote to even consider—this seemed to him an incredible feat. And he told her so.

'And did you drive all the way by yourself?'

Yes, she had, and gradually, as the coffee warmed and nourished her and Bleeker's innocent friendliness assured her, she explained the reasons that had driven her to such desperation.

She had left another girl behind. They had both been trainee nurses at one of the larger public hospitals when the first of the Asian bacteriological missiles had scattered their virulent cargo to the winds. Like Bleeker they had been among the first great waves of casualties and they, too, had been hastily injected with a bewildering number of antibiotics. In those few short hours before the end the medical staffs of all the great hospitals of the world still in action had rushed to use the first of them as guinea pigs in a desperate search for an antidote for the unknown virus. But there hadn't been time to sort anything out. In a way that the Asian war lords had been unable to predict their carefully nurtured weapon mutated in the radio-active fallout that was sweeping around the world from the blistered and dying Americas. The virus became aerophobic and was soon swept by those same scouring winds to every corner of the globe. In less than a week what was left of the civilized world had been ravaged and nearly destroyed by the insatiable little bug that made a brief and agonizing feast of the brain and central nervous system—and the clumsy Asian despots, instead of usurping the rich Australian continent, untainted by the war that had blackened most of the Northern hemisphere, found themselves dying and driven mad and unable to salvage anything from the crumbling world they had helped to sunder. Perhaps theirs was the greatest madness of all.

'Then it isn't any different over there?' Bleeker asked. All hope had not yet died but it was flaking away a little at a time.

'No. That's why... well, I thought that over here, along the more densely populated east coast, the survival level might have been greater...'

Which it probably had. But that hadn't made the pattern any different—only more dangerous, as she would soon find out; if she hadn't already.

Perth had known its share of madmen and predators. When the world collapsed its agony was mirrored in the minds of those lucky enough to survive. For many of them madness was the only way they could manage in this terrible new world—and their madness grew from a despair too great for them to manage.

But Deirdre and her companion had somehow managed to make the enormous effort of adjustment and accept what was left of the world. But it wasn't always easy.

A month or so after the catastrophe the city had been taken over by several truck-loads of men from the north. They were aggressive and arrogant and were much of a pattern. Rough, crude workers from the distant Ord River projects and they felt, not without some justification, that they were the true inheritors of the dying Earth.

She stumbled over this part of the story and Bleeker had to fill in some of the gaps intuitively. It wasn't a pleasant task.

'Ellen—that was the other girl—she... she was never

what you would call a pretty girl—rather one you would call 'nice' out of politeness. You know what I mean. Before the war she had tipped the scales at something like eleven stone. The plague changed all that. When I last saw her she was down to about eight and a half—it made quite a difference. I suppose that suddenly finding herself the centre of attention for a bunch of leering, sex-starved station hands was just too much for her.' She stopped and looked down at her empty coffee mug. 'I... I decided to come over here and... see if things were any better.'

Bleeker had seen enough of the half-wild predators stalking the dead streets of Melbourne not to need any word-pictures painted for him of this new race of men, and he knew that under the same circumstances he too would have been driven to such desperate flight.

Of course she had planned her trek carefully. She chose a brand new Ford truck and crammed it full of enough supplies and enough petrol to circumnavigate the continent, and as well as a prodigious number of spare parts she also found room in the cavernous shell for a mini-car and the appropriate spare parts. So she embarked as prepared as she could manage and made the long trip across the empty Australian continent alone and unseen. At Port Augusta, with the desert behind her and the lush green fields of Victoria ahead of her, she abandoned the truck for a high-powered Porsche sports car and revelled in the speed that now became possible. She saw no signs of activity anywhere. She changed cars several times and her most recent, an inconspicuous blue Volkswagon sedan, had run out of petrol just a little way down the mountain highway.

'Yes—I heard you coming,' Bleeker said. And then an odd thought occurred to him. 'Surely... surely you didn't expect to find your grandparents alive?'

She looked wistful. 'Not really—although I suppose there was always a chance that—' She looked away. After a moment she got up and went over to where the wide french windows looked out over the Basin, and when she spoke she kept her face averted, as though she was studying the surrounding hills, but he knew that whatever she saw was with the mind's eye of another time.

'When I was very young—before my parents shifted to the West—I used to spend my holidays up here. At least two or three times a year. That's how I came to know—and love—the country. It was so different to the asphalt playgrounds of the schools I knew and the crowded suburban roads with their narrow nature strips running down the centre—which was all we kids had to play on.'

'No, I don't suppose I really expected to find them here—and alive.'

She turned around and there was a wistful sort of smile in her eyes. 'But it would have been nice...'

There was nothing he could say. When one has lost so much one cannot increase the debt.

'I suppose you came up here to get away from the smell.' It wasn't a question, and put so bluntly her words had the capacity to shock him. Not that the air of the Dandengs was noticeably cleaner than anywhere else—the odour of death clung too heavily to the earth for it to be escaped merely by moving twenty miles out into the country. The most beneficial result of such a movement was being removed from the proximity of the disaster. Without the terrible stillness of the dead city and its million rotting corpses to remind him that the human race was, if not effectively dead, then certainly dying, he found that it

was possible to live again. In isolation he had found the courage to continue. In the city he had only found despair—and something worse. He had known the crushing weight of terror and he did not wish to find that burden again. He had reached a calm at the centre of a terrible hurricane and while it lasted there was hope.

He looked away. 'What do you intend doing now?'

She shrugged. 'I hadn't thought.' Any uncertainty that might have existed between them seemed to have disappeared. The beginnings of trust and friendship had crept into their relationship.

He stood up. 'Some more coffee? I'll get you something to eat if you're hungry. If you like... if you would...'

His good intentions developed into awkwardness.

He took a deep breath. 'You... you can stay here for a while, if you like. After all, the house is really yours.'

She had made him feel an interloper.

'And it's much safer up here than down near the city.'

Inexplicably she laughed. He looked at her in surprise, unable to fathom the reason for her amusement. Something seemed to have opened a vault deep inside her and released a fit of girlish laughter.

She apologised, rubbing her eyes and smiling at the same time. 'I'm sorry—it's just that, well, you sounded so damned funny, that's all. I couldn't help laughing.'

She had not meant the words to cut but Bleeker bled just the same. 'I didn't mean to—'

'Oh, that's all right. I just find it difficult to think about "human right" any more...'

'But it's yours,' he insisted, 'if only by right of inheritance!'

And this time she really had to restrain herself. Perhaps he sounded foolish, but he was determined to make his point: it was important to *him* that he should.

'I don't feel right about it,' he continued. 'Stay here for a while, if you like. I won't get in your way. There's plenty of room. I... I'll move upstairs and you can have down here. We needn't get in each other's way. I'll see to that. It's big enough for—but then you already know that, don't you? I'll move all my things upstairs—most of them are there already, if it comes to that. Guess I only eat down here and prowled around a bit, and there's no reason why we...'

She gave him a curious look. He was unlike any predator she had met. He had managed to retain a shy, youthful vigour that seemed out of place in this malevolent new society. He was lithe and pale; his skin did not appear to like the sun. His hair was cropped short and his blond moustache was neatly trimmed; his high cheekbones gave him an aesthetic appearance. He looked like someone who took time out to expect visitors, and she found that observation amusing. But he did not look like a killer. He looked like any young man she might have met at a party in one of those dear dead days before the war; he might even have excited her with his sensitive masculinity, and the prospect of an evening together spent wine, dining and dancing—or perhaps they might have taken in a movie, or a show of some sort. He didn't quite look the ballroom type. But this wasn't pre-war and he was offering her something very different, and although there remained a puzzling strangeness about him she did not consciously fear or distrust him. If anything he seemed the more nervous of the two and this thought almost brought a mischievous smile to her lips.

She considered his offer. Sooner or later there would

have to come an end to her wandering and she would have to accept some sort of protection if she was ever to survive in this grim and dying world. Ellen had demonstrated that there was no security in groups of women—only heightened danger, and like generations of women before her she knew that she would eventually have to accept the protection of the conqueror male. The thought had terrified her. She had seen enough of the new inheritors to have preferred a quick and painless death rather than rape and abuse by their savage hands. So far she had been lucky—but she couldn't expect this to last indefinitely. Now, and for probably the one and only time in her flight, she had a *choice*. And if she was to become mistress to any man then it would be better to bed down with someone she could trust and perhaps even become fond of. And it would be nice to sleep without the desperate nightmares thrusting her awake.

She was tired and eaten away with loneliness. To pause a while, to *rest*, would be a luxury she was reluctant to forgo, so much to his surprise she decided to stay.

And that evening she snuggled down into warm blankets and felt more secure than she had in the long year since the war. She stared up at the darkened ceiling and thought of Bleeker. He was up there somewhere, moving around quietly so as not to disturb her.

A strange young man—but resourceful. He had cooked their evening meal on a stove fueled by portable gas cylinders. There was also a small petrol-driven generator underneath the house that provided them with electricity, but before he switched on the lights he made certain precautions. All the windows were provided with heavy wooden shutters with velvet light-traps and he made sure these were all securely latched and that all the doors were locked before he lit up the main room. But the lights were feeble low-density neon filaments that brought to the room a quality of candlelight. He was a very cautious man.

And he could also cook, although he insisted that this craft had been forced upon him out of necessity. In the darkness she smiled at his awkwardness and grew strange when she thought of the chance that had thrown them together. Everything seemed unreal after her long months of despair—but there were some chances she was still not prepared to take.

She slept fully clothed and with the pistol Bleeker had returned resting reassuringly underneath her pillow.

She rose early and found that Bleeker had already been up for several hours. At this time of the year the mountains were breathtaking in their autumn beauty and an incentive not to oversleep. He took her out on the front porch and showed her the rich warm colours of the new day and she found that the early morning sunlight possessed an almost tangible presence—Or perhaps this newly discovered warmth came not from the sun alone but also in part from the unexpected friendship she had travelled so far to find. But she found it strange that his nervous awkwardness would not leave him.

'There's warm water,' he said, 'if you'd like a shower. I've had the gas heater going since I got up...'

She did not need any further encouragement but locked herself into the bathroom and stripped off her dusty and travel-stained clothes and stepped under the hot shower. The luxury of clean soap and fresh water was something she had almost forgotten; when one fears for one's life and spends the greater part of each new day in some sort of

flight then it is easy to allow the ritual of physical cleanliness to go by the board. But no more. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back so that the water thundered down upon her upturned face and there was such warmth and happiness inside her that she thought she would burst.

And then she stepped out onto the bathmat and towelled herself dry and stared at the grubby heap of clothes on the floor. Her moment of happiness faded. An overwhelming sadness swept over her and she sat down on the edge of the bath and began to cry. Softly, for the sadness was personal, but it lasted for a long time, and when it was finished she wiped her eyes and pulled on the grimy underwear and studied herself in the small mirror above the washbasin.

Crying hadn't helped. Now here eyes were swollen and puffy and she looked ages older than she should have been. But some fresh air and sunshine and a bit of make-up would remedy that—and some new clothes from somewhere. For the first time since the war she felt conscious of herself and anxious to look—well, if not attractive, then at least presentable and not like something newly salvaged from the slums.

Bleeker was waiting in the kitchen. They breakfasted on pancakes and coffee—not an instant powder but genuine coffee beans. It had been some time since she had allowed an awareness of the difference to disappear from her memory, along with so many things once thought important but which were no longer of any currency.

They dawdled over the meal. Time was unimportant and there was so much to discover in each other. And yet Bleeker remained oddly reticent. He had listened and encouraged all sort of confessions from her but apart from a brief mention of his early days in the city he had seemed reluctant to divulge more than a cursory note about his activities since the war. And it was not easy to move the conversation in his direction. But she was patient. Perhaps he hid some terrifying experience of his own and was not yet ready to speak about it. There was plenty of time. Eventually he would overcome his shyness and begin to speak of the things he now withheld.

'I thought we might drive down to Croydon,' he said. 'I need some fresh supplies and I guess you could do with a few things. Did you bring much with you?'

He was thinking of her car but she shook her head. She had travelled light and foraged her food as she went. She had never stayed long enough in any one place to have needed a source of supplies.

While she finished her third cup of rich dark coffee he excused himself and went out to ready a car for the journey.

There was a large shed at the rear of the house which he now used for a garage. He had collected three cars—a super-fast Alfa Romeo sedan, a powerful Ford kombi-wagon and a sturdy Toyota land cruiser. It was this latter vehicle that he used most. Its four wheel drive and adjustable differential made it ideal for the narrow tracks and corrugated side-tracks he favoured in his travels. The Alfa was a sop to his vanity; he had never found the courage to drive the beautiful machine down the highway for fear that some band of predators might catch sight of him—and he had no desire to court their displeasure. If that occasion ever arose then he had no doubt that they could never keep up with him through the inhospitable mountain areas where the Toyota could happily manage. His early days in the city had shown him that the survivors chose flamboyantly

and with no thought of reliability when they grabbed a car. In the land-cruiser he felt confident and safe from any interference.

He started it up and drove around to the front of the house. The girl was waiting for him. He motioned her into the car and then went back into the house for his rifle.

'You forgot this,' he said, and handed her the holstered pistol. 'Don't ever get lazy about these things.'

He seemed suddenly tense, as though leaving the house imposed a peril upon them he was unwilling to accept. But supplies were necessary and these monthly visits to the nearby township could not be avoided—but they were never pleasant.

She buckled the gun around her waist and sat back thoughtfully in the seat. He eased the Toyota gently into first gear and they idled quietly down the driveway towards the highway.

The bush was dense hereabouts. Gum trees were packed tightly together and they soared several hundred feet overhead. It was possible to look out over the distant city from a vantage point to the rear of the house but Bleeker hardly ever bothered. What concerned him was the absolute seclusion provided by the thick scrub and dense forest. The house could not be seen from the highway and one would have to travel a most circuitous route around the mountain side to see any sign of the house. There were many such residences scattered throughout the more popular areas of Mount Dandenong but none so well hidden as the one Bleeker had chosen. Within it he felt just about as safe as any man could feel in this dreadful day and age—away from it he was never sure from moment to moment where his next move would take him.

They almost coasted down the steep highway to Croydton. He kept the car humming softly in top gear and avoided noisy gear-changing whenever possible. She felt that his caution was perhaps a little overdone but her admiration never waned for a moment. It was good to have company as courteous and as thoughtful as this.

As they approached the township he slipped the car into neutral and switched off the motor. They rolled quietly for the last half mile and whispered into the main street. Bleeker nimbly chose top gear and switched on the ignition. He released the clutch and the engine turned over with only a faint growl of protest. They purred along at a steady ten to fifteen miles an hour until he brought the car to a gentle stop outside a supermarket. He left the motor running and while she kept a nervous eye upon the deserted streets he went inside and filled a large hessian bag with tinned foodstuffs. He was back inside the car in a matter of minutes, breathing heavily. He threw the bag in the empty space behind the front seat and was about to move off when Dierdre asked if he could wait a moment while she picked up a few things.

'These clothes,' she said, 'I've been living in them for months. I'd like to get some new ones.'

She could see that he didn't like the idea of spending any longer than was necessary away from the house, but he nodded. 'Make it quick, I... I don't like hanging around here.'

She touched him lightly on the arm in thanks and scrambled out of the idling car.

It was musty inside the supermarket and the air was heavy with unpleasant odours. She kept her eyes away from the floor as she moved because she knew what things she might find there—and bodies twelve months dead are

not a pretty sight. Once or twice she blundered into the remains of something underfoot but she always stepped nimbly aside and around whatever it was.

She searched and quickly found the women's wear department and grabbed a couple of pairs of slacks from the dusty hangers. She draped these over one arm and moved along the stalls until she found some bright coloured jumpers and blouses. Had it not been for the undertones of death and decay permeating the supermarket she might have been some shoplifter on a spree—but she did not smile. This was deadly business.

She could hear the Toyota growling impatiently. She did not want to keep him waiting too long so she hurriedly bundled some fresh underwear into her arms, grabbed herself a couple of pairs of leather sandals, and went back outside.

Bleeker managed a wry grin as she tumbled the lot back into the car. She had meant to get some cosmetics but that would have to wait.

He revved the engine a little and they crawled off reluctantly in third. A second later he had dropped into quiet fourth again and they were moving on through the deserted township.

Already she felt better. First the shower and now this; she tried to imagine what it would be like to feel lace next to her skin again and what it would be like to wear bright, feminine colours instead of the drab anonymity her flight had forced upon her.

They stopped at a garage and, while she kept careful watch, he rolled a couple of drums out of the back of the car and filled them with petrol from a hand pump he had installed some months previously.

It was slow work and it seemed to increase his nervous tension. Some of this was transmitted to her and she found herself wishing that he would hurry and wondering how long it would be before they got back to the safety and seclusion of the house.

She did not relax until he had lifted both drums up into the back of the car and covered the hand-pump with an old piece of oil-stained tarpaulin.

'Where to now?' she asked as they moved off.

'To see some friends of mine.'

Her nerves jumped on edge. Her eyes widened with the beginnings of an old fear. 'You didn't tell me there was anybody else living here—'

He smiled. 'Oh, relax, will you. Nothing to get alarmed about. Just a middle-aged couple I got to know a little while back. Quite harmless. You should like them...'

He swung the car off the main street and up a narrow lane. The engine protested and he changed down to third. They laboured like this through a bewildering number of twists and turns as Bleeker found his devious way through the back streets of the township. Eventually they pulled up outside a dirty-white weather-board house of indeterminate age.

He cut the motor.

He could feel her body against his, tense and taut like a bow string.

'Oh, for god's sake take it easy,' he chided. 'They're fine old people.'

As they got out of the car the ancient timbers of the house creaked and the front door opened a few cautious inches. A face peered out uncertainly.

'Hullo there, Fred,' Bleeker called out, affably. He helped Deirdre over the fallen fence and up the weed encrusted

cement path to where the wary oldest stood framed in the rickety doorway. 'How've you been?'

The old man sniffed. 'Can't complain. How's yourself?'

The exchange was probably half as old as time itself; only the rifle slung casually across Bleeker's shoulders and the shot-gun held unsteadily in the old man's hands made it seem oddly out of context. He eyed the girl questioningly.

'This is Deirdre,' Bleeker explained. 'Deirdre Ashton. She's driven all the way from Perth—can you imagine that? The place I'm at used to belong to her grandparents. Deirdre, this is Fred Kelly . . .'

She managed a smile and shook the old man's hand. The oldest seemed uneasy and, after a quick look up and down the narrow street ushered them inside.

They followed him into the cool, musty passageway which cut the house into two sections. He was a little man, almost hairless and the dry skin of his deeply weathered features was stretched into painful crevasses. His eyes had sunk deeply into his face and his emaciated body showed starkly through the thin clothes he wore.

He opened a door mid-way down the passage and motioned them through.

'Here's Carl to see you, dear,' he wheezed, to somebody inside the small room whom they couldn't yet see. 'You remember Carl, don't you? From up the Mount?'

Deirdre saw a shrunken, shrivelled old woman sitting in a wheel chair. Bleeker squeezed her hand reassuringly and stepped forward.

'Hullo, Mrs Kelly,' he said, and smiled. She always liked people to smile. It was the only method of communication she had left.

If Fred Kelly had suffered badly from the after effects of the plague then his wife had been treated even more unjustly. She sat before them a twisted caricature of what had once been a woman, huddled over hands locked weakly together in her lap, and looking up at them with the small bright eyes of a child. Like that small handful of others she had recovered from the virus but it had left her stricken with paralysis. Her muscles were useless, her body no more than a senseless lump of flesh. Her vocal chords could produce only frightening baby-like sounds—and yet she lived. Only her mind seemed really alive and there were times when Bleeker wondered just how much longer even that would last.

'I haven't seen you for a while,' he went on, conscious that the mind to whom he spoke was no longer aware of time in the strictly human sense, 'and I'll try and get down more often.' He knew that Fred would like that.

He was talking overloud because on his previous visit Kelly had informed him that his wife's hearing had begun to deteriorate—and looking down at her he wondered however she had managed to survive so long. Perhaps it was the old man's devotion that made all the difference. He noticed that he seemed more stooped and slower in his movements than he remembered.

Don't let him go first, he thought, desperately, for who would there be then to care for this parody of humanity?

He listened to Kelly talking in his high-pitched voice, telling his wife all about the young lady from Perth, and was pleased to see how Deirdre had accepted the situation. Her tenseness had all but disappeared and that made him feel better.

Kelly looked up. 'Carl, I've got some beer left—but I've

run out of kero' for the 'fridge, and it won't be cold. Been meaning to get some for the past few days but just haven't got around to it. Perhaps you'd like a glass? How about you, young lady?'

Her mouth was dry but not with thirst. She shook her head. 'No thanks. It's a bit early in the day for me.'

'Ah, garn with yer. Here, you stay here with Joyce while Carl and I have one, eh Carl?'

There was a message in the old man's eyes that worried Bleeker. 'That sounds a good idea.' The prospect of warm beer was somewhat more interesting than staying too long in the room with the pathetic cripple. He squeezed Deirdre's arm as they left the room. 'Won't be long. Keep the old girl company for a moment.'

And then she was alone with the old woman, looking across the great gulf that separated them and watching the pale white hands bounce and joggle of their own free will in her lap like nervous little puppies—and wondering what she could say.

The young/old face looked up at her, eyes watery and mouth still where it constantly chewed away at nothing, waiting for her to say something so that she might smile that inane but meaningful smile she alone found reassuring.

It was muggy in the tiny kitchen. Kelly opened two cans of beer and put them on the table. They sat down and drank slowly.

'The ol' girl hasn't been the best lately,' Kelly complained, wiping his lips absently with the back of his hand.

'Oh? What is it this time?'

'Arh, she's 'avin' trouble with 'er bowels again. Can't move a thing. Must be 'bout a week or more since the last time. I just take 'er out there an' she just sits, you know, *sits, an' nothin' . . .'*

He noticed the strained look on the young man's face, so he tactfully changed the subject. 'Saw a friend of yours yesterday . . .'

'A friend?'

'Yeah. Fellow by the name 'er Carson. Stan Carson. You know 'im?'

Bleeker's fingers closed tightly around the can of beer. Carson . . . *here?*

'Shifty looking character?' he suggested. 'About five-ten, rather swarthy . . . dark complexion and a . . . a heavy black moustache? Could have a beard by now . . .'

Kelly nodded. 'That's 'im. Nasty bugger if you ask me.'

'And was there . . . anyone else with him?'

'Yep. Four of 'em. Mean bunch all round. They came a-roarin' down the main street in a big truck. Kicked up such a racket that I went out to see what all the fuss was about . . .'

Bleeker tried to picture this withered little man walking up to a bunch of predators and wishing them good afternoon. It was a ludicrous picture.

His mouth was dry, despite the beer. 'How . . . how did they react: friendly?'

The old man's eyes narrowed shrewdly. 'Well, not so's you'd notice, m'boy. Oh, I suppose they was polite enough in a nasty sort of way—but they didn't fool me for a minute. I knew what they was up to. They didn't act like they was on some pleasure trip, y'know—and then they started asking funny questions.'

'What sort of questions?'

'Well, like I said, this guy Carson started asking after you. Wanted to know if I'd seen a fellow answering your

description wandering around these parts. I said of course that I hadn't—that I hadn't seen hide nor hair of anyone since the war. I think maybe they thought I was a little deaf—if you know what I mean—and not to be taken seriously—otherwise they might have gotten rough. Maybe I encouraged them to think like that—you understand?

Bleeker slumped back in his chair. A great wave of relief washed over him. The last person he ever wanted to see again was the self-styled King of the city of Melbourne. He'd had enough of that. Three terrifying months of it.

Kelly nodded to himself. He seemed quite pleased with what he had done. 'I didn't think you'd want to meet a bunch like that.'

He regarded the old man with a new respect. Why, the bloody old fox ...

'There was something else, though,' Kelly added. 'They ... they wanted to know if I'd seen a young girl passing through here.'

An unseen fist knocked the fitful wind out of Bleeker. His new world seemed intolerably heavy and impossible to escape.

Kelly grinned and rubbed his stubbled face and went on. 'Course I told them no, 'cause I *hadn't*. He leaned forward earnestly. 'Carl, those men were *hungry*. And it wasn't for food. I ain't so old that I've forgotten about those things. Boy—for god's sake look after her. If they find her—if they catch her ...'

A great dark pit seemed to yawn towards the youth. In the past few months he had somehow managed to forget the barbarous world he had once been part of—and now it had returned to threaten him anew.

When he finally found his voice it was to humbly thank the old man for all he had done. 'Don't ... don't say anything to Deirdre, will you? I ... I can't see any ... sense ... upsetting her. She's only just found peace of mind after a terrible journey. Please ...?'

Kelly nodded. 'Sure, m'boy. But you will be careful, won't you? I tell you they looked as mean and as nasty as any men *can* look. God help us all if they're the best of what's left. I don't think we stand much of a chance; no chance at all. Fertiliser, that's all we'll be. *Fertiliser* ...'

Bleeker stood up from the table, the warm beer forgotten. 'I think we'd better get back to the house.'

Kelly threw his empty can into the bin beneath the sink. 'Okay, I'd better see about getting Joyce some lunch ...'

Once they were clear of the township Bleeker felt a little better. He had come to dislike any form of city, town or village for the lack of safety they implied. Out in the open a man at least stood a chance, but where the mark of civilisation had once been the most concentrated danger could lurk behind every corner.

He took a different way back to the house, a direction that took them bouncing and struggling along some narrow all-weather tracks through the dense bushlands. They finally emerged from the scrub at the back of the house and he drove the Toyota into the garage. As he unloaded the two heavy sacks Deirdre drew his attention to the great pall of smoke on the horizon.

'Carl—the city! It's burning!'

He turned from what he was doing and followed the direction of her gaze. A great funnel of smoke had formed and was climbing high into the sky above the trees and spreading out across the eastern horizon.

'I wonder what started it?'

Bleeker shrugged. 'Anything.' Maybe someone was careless with a match—it would be just like one of Carson's goons to do something like that. And it was too late now to do anything about it.

'Probably only a handful of people left in the city,' he lied, 'and some fool has to get careless with matches.'

Later, when they had finished unloading everything from the car, he took her higher up the mountain so that they could see the city sprawled like some dying animal in the distance, gushing up a great gout of evil black smoke that gradually thickened and then spread. In his heart Bleeker found that he could not mourn for the city had died a year ago when the world went mad—this was more like a delayed cremation and it would purge the streets of the dead and perhaps even lessen to a small degree the great pall of death clinging to the face of the land. A funeral pyre. But it would be a pity if the whole city was burned to the ground. Something should remain.

'What?' Deirdre asked.

'Nothing,' he answered. He must have been speaking aloud. He squinted up at the sky. Only a few heavy clouds were crawling up from the south-west. With a bit of luck they might get some rain and that might lay the great conflagration currently eating away at the distant metropolis—but whether there would be enough of it with time enough to spare he couldn't even hazard a guess. The elements were once again in command of the Earth and would do with it as they willed.

'We'd better pray for some rain,' he said, gesturing at the grey sky. 'And once it starts raining in Melbourne,' he observed—not without some truth—it doesn't usually let up for a fortnight.'

But there was no rain that afternoon and the sky that night burned with an eerie red glow. To Deirdre it seemed that Bleeker had become of a sudden morose and uncommunicative. She set her hair and changed into her new clothes and tried to be cheerful but it seemed a wasted effort. The focus of his mind was on other things and there were no doors through which she could enter.

They dined early that evening and Bleeker excused himself almost immediately and went upstairs. Something seemed to have disturbed him but he was unwilling to share his problem with her. She was left with some books to read and very little choice. She sat in her room feeling uneasy and discovered something new and frightening.

It was one thing to be lonely and afraid and constantly on the run—but it was much worse to be locked up and lonely with another human being.

Some time during the night it had begun to rain. Slowly at first, only a few self-conscious drops of water falling upon the thirsty ground, but when Bleeker woke next morning he found the outside world obscured by a steady downpour.

It was six-thirty. The girl was not yet up. He dressed and slipped quietly out of the house.

The ground outside had already become muddy. The sky was dark and swollen and it seemed likely that the rain would not let up for some time. If it was sufficiently widespread then it would have saved the burning city some time ago. But his own concerns were more personal.

He wore a heavy dark green plastic overcoat and a wide-brimmed matching sou-wester pulled well down around his head. He carried his rifle underneath his coat and pressed against his side. He would have felt defenceless

without it. He had never once killed any living thing but he was prepared to do so if ever his life was threatened. That was one of the more terrible lessons he had had to accept.

He kept well clear of the highway and made his way through the heavy undergrowth along the side of the road. There was something menacing about a forest where the sunlight never penetrated; the heavy weight of the rain-soaked foliage pressed against him and the earth was soggy underfoot in a way that was unpleasant and unfriendly. He longed for the sunshine and the clear skies and the familiar sounds of the bush—but not yet. Not until he had completed his important chore.

The blue Volkswagen squatted on the side of the road. One of its tyres was flat and this gave it a drooping, despondent air that complimented the dreary weather. He opened the bonnet and unscrewed the petrol cap and checked that the tank was dry. This done he lifted the one-gallon can he had brought with him and slopped petrol into the wide neck. When this was done he carefully replaced the top of the can and placed it to one side—then he got inside and started the car.

He had decided during the course of a long and mostly sleepless night that it would be best to dispose of the car. Carson and his men had obviously caught sight of the girl somewhere in the city and had given chase—in which case they would have a good description of her vehicle. And he had already worked out a suitable site where it should be safely hidden.

He turned the car around and let it idle down the highway, thumping absurdly where the flat tyre caused imbalance. But there wasn't far to go. A couple of hundred yards further on there was a devil's elbow—the road swung around in a sharp hairpin bend and a section of the hillside had been graded out to allow for turning. Bleeker gunned the Volkswagen, grabbed first gear and sent the ungainly vehicle scrambling up the slope and crashed through some dense underbrush before coming to a stop.

He cut the motor quickly. He became conscious of the eerie silence of the bush; no bird sang, no creature stirred and the once familiar growl of traffic had been absent for more than a year. This was what the world must have been like, he mused, when creation had not yet made up its mind what to do with itself.

He got out. The car had blundered about a hundred feet into a narrow declivity and left a trail of smashed and broken undergrowth. But the rain had made the brush and bushes resilient; they would soon spring up again. There were a few broken saplings but nothing that couldn't be camouflaged or used to advantage—so he began the laborious business of covering the car with as much material as he could find. He ripped young branches from nearby trees and draped them over the car. He worked carefully so that by the end of half an hour his hands were bruised and bleeding but it was impossible for a passerby to see the car from the road—then he began work on covering the tracks of the car from the highway.

It was messy, time consuming work—but it had to be done, and all the time the rain sifted down and blurred the ground into mud and made his work easier. When he was satisfied that he had done his best he backtracked to the car for a final check and it was while he was studying his handiwork with satisfaction that he became aware that he was being watched.

A cold fist of fear closed down upon him. He could not move and all the terrors that had lurked inside him these

long lonely months began to parade before him.

There was no sound. Only the soft drip of the rain from the branches of the trees and his own blood hammering in his head. He waited, and something compelled him to move. He looked up, and turned around to his right, and deep in the undergrowth something moved. Something dark—black almost, and very human.

He was alone and unarmed and a fool. He had left the rifle back with the empty petrol can. They were both waiting for the roadside several hundred yards away. They might just as well have been light-years for all that mattered. He had always been so careful and now this one small mistake and his world was ready to crash around him.

He remained motionless. Flight seemed hopeless. The rain made it difficult to observe anything clearly but for a moment a face became visible in the pervading greenery; an inscrutable black face with a wide, protruding forehead and squat features. He was naked and the rain had given a smooth film of moisture to his skin so that it seemed to have a sheen in the dull sunlight.

They stared at each other. The aboriginal was armed; he carried a spear and woomera but there was no way of telling what his movements would be. His manner did not appear menacing but Bleeker knew that it was impossible to gauge a native's intentions under such conditions.

His back crawled. He wondered how many more were hidden in the bush and if he was surrounded—and what they would do with him. The aborigine's spear was a good eight feet long and cruelly barbed; he wondered what it would feel like to have that thing crash into his body and knew that it would be a terrible way to die.

Nothing moved. They stared at each other and time seemed to weigh on forever. No expression moved across the black man's impassive stone-age face and it was several moments before Bleeker realised that he had slipped back into the forest just as silently as he had emerged. The rain washed down heavier than before and there was no sign of life around him.

Somehow his frozen limbs responded. He began to back cautiously towards the highway, his eyes scanning the sodden foliage intently. Occasionally he took a quick look around him just in case there were others closing in; he feared more than anything else the terrible impact of a spear through his back.

He made it out onto the road and began hurrying up the highway, looking back all the time. He broke into a run and did not stop until he arrived gasping at the spot where he had left the petrol can and had snatched up the rifle. Backing into the trees he looked back the way he had come. Nothing stirred. The highway was as deserted as it had always been and nothing moved in the nearby trees that he could detect.

He rubbed his eyes and face. He was trembling and for a moment he began to believe that he had imagined the entire incident—but a memory refuted this. He had thought that the native's face had been inscrutable but now he realised that there was a name for the expression he had gauged implicit in the black man's eyes: curiosity. Very likely the man had not wished him any harm—why should he? Game was plentiful in the hills and his people were more accustomed than any white man to living off the land.

Once, long ago, we pushed them back into the desert, Bleeker realised—but now they're coming back, making the

long trek from the dead heart of the continent to a world that was more alive and abundant to them than it could ever be to Bleeker. The old status quo was being restored.

He hurried back to the house, anxious to tell Deirdre what had happened and to caution her against movement away from the house. It was some time before his uncontrollable shaking disappeared.

Deirdre had only been up for a short time when he returned. Without any explanation she sensed intuitively that something had happened outside and her expression quickly mirrored his own nervousness.

'What's the matter?' she asked. 'What happened?'

He pulled off the dripping rain coat and sou-wester and dropped them carelessly into a chair. There was no sense in panicking. They were safe inside the house now and well protected and they had enough guns and ammunition to withstand a small army. But he was still afraid.

He sat down in a chair and worked his hands over his wet face. 'I... I went down to shift your car off the road.' He stopped. He had been on the point of disclosing to her what he knew of Carson's recent activities but he stopped himself in time. No sense upsetting the girl any more than was necessary—but of course some sort of explanation was needed...

'Somebody might have seen you drive through the city,' he said. 'And they might have followed you, looking for a blue Volkswagon. No chance of them finding it now...'

She studied him uncertainly. Her mind was still on tip toe. 'You're soaked,' she said, and moved off towards the bathroom. 'I'll get you a towel...'

'Deirdre...'

She turned around.

He pushed at his wet blond hair nervously. 'I... I saw somebody down there. A black—an aborigine! Gave me quite a scare. Oh, he didn't threaten me or anything like that.' He tried to describe the motionless scene in the clearing but his words could not conjure up the enormous tension implicit in the meeting. 'We just stood there, looking at each other. He had this bloody great big spear next to him and I'd left the rifle a hundred yards up the road. Silly of me, I know, and I won't let it happen again...'

Her nervousness increased. She came back into the room. 'And what happened?'

He shrugged. 'That's the funny part—*nothing*. I don't know how long we stood there with the rain drifting down around us—but all of a sudden he was gone, slipped back into the bush as silently as he had come.'

'And that's *all*? He didn't make any move to communicate?'

'No.' Why should he? There had been numerous occasions in the past few months when Bleeker had imagined he had seen movements in the surrounding forest that could not have been familiar animals; he had told himself that nothing moved there any more save the depleted fauna—but now he wasn't so sure. There was the possibility that the natives were immune to the virus which had brought racial genocide to the white man—and if not then they had been driven years ago to such remote sections of the continent that any contact they had had with the white man's civilisation would have been peripheral. There were many scattered tribes who had existed without any sort of communication with either government or clergy and it was very likely that they would by now outnumber the pitiful handful of whites who had survived. It was a sobering thought.

Deirdre listened to his ideas and became disconcerted. There had seemed enough dangers to be prepared against but this new thing he had discovered placed a different aspect on survival.

'What should we do, Carl—should we approach them next time we see them—or what?'

'I don't know—I really don't. If they've penetrated this far east then they'll have seen the cities and figured out that something terrible has happened. The more civilized tribes will be able to guess at the nature of the cataclysm but the more backward of them will only know that some dreadful magic descended upon the white man. Contact between them will only garble the truth—I suppose we've already begun to infiltrate their mythology—in which case I don't know *how* we should go about approaching them.'

'Why not as friends?'

He thought about that for a moment. 'Why not as Gods? Either would be applicable.'

Surveying the problem seemed to yield the suspicion that there was no valid reason for the natives to become aggressive—unless their grim racial memory told them that this should be so. He didn't know what to think.

And wait and see had become his operative philosophy.

It rained steadily all day. Bleeker spent most of his time wandering around the outside of the house searching the surrounding bush uneasily for any signs of movement. But he knew that this sort of activity was only a gesture; the natives belonged to this land in a way that urban man did not and they had mastered long ago a way of moving through the undergrowth that matched the movement of water beneath the waves. Yet the activity eased his restlessness and kept him apart from the woman. His world had been ripped open and all sorts of unpleasant things were dropping out. Perhaps he should have let her move on and never have asked her to stay and then...

Deirdre called him in half-way through the dismal afternoon and made him eat a quick lunch. She seemed strangely calm, as though she had drawn upon deep reserves of courage even she had been unaware of.

But he ate morosely and was ill at ease, and when she had cleared away the dishes he did not go again outside but went upstairs.

'You don't look well,' she called out.

He paused half way up the stairs and looked back. His face was paler than usual and there was a desperate haunted look in his eyes.

'I think I've given myself a headache.'

'As long as it isn't the flu.'

Her concern only served to remind him of the manifold threats to their lives; even something as common as a cold could prove fatal in this mad world where there were no friendly doctors to prescribe and no pharmacists ready to prepare an efficacious cure. Even little things could kill.

'I'll just rest up for a while,' he said, 'and take some codeine.' He motioned towards the windows. 'I'd keep an eye out, just in case—and don't get too far away from a rifle.' He had placed several at strategic points throughout the house and now there wasn't much more he could do—except wait. And that had become a singular occupation.

She watched him make his way wearily up the stairs and felt a sudden weight descend upon her unwilling shoulders.

Where would it all end? Would they live out the rest of their useless lives frightened of everything that moved, unable to relax and share anything worthwhile? Had life

become so worthless? Had hope become a grinning gargoyle?

She went to the front door and opened it and walked out onto the porch. The rain had eased off a little and wan sunlight struggled fitfully through some tattered clouds. Yet the aspect was unpleasant. She couldn't believe that a small army of aborigines lurked unseen in the wet undergrowth crowding the house; they were a simple people and probably much too concerned with the business of keeping alive to give more than a cursory acknowledgement to the white man's ruined world—perhaps they even regarded people like themselves as inexplicably fallen from Grace and something to be avoided lest their black skins be corrupted by the same dreadful malaise.

Bleeker's reaction still seemed out of all proportion to the hypothetical menace of the solitary aborigine he had seen. She felt that there was something more than this, something behind his general antipathy which she could not fathom—and she was convinced that if she could somehow break through this insularity then the world would not seem so malevolent.

Bleeker remained upstairs for the rest of the afternoon. She thought once or twice of going up to him and making sure that he was all right but she could not bring herself to ascend the narrow staircase—there was an agreement between them that somehow kept them apart and it was best identified by the unseen barrier that separated Bleeker's part of the house.

Around about five-thirty she went into the kitchen and thought about making a start on dinner. The cupboards were all well-stocked but it wasn't for the first time that she hungered for fresh eggs—and bread and tomatoes fresh from the bush and a hundred other things that had assumed an importance out of all proportion to their old availability.

Just how long could they go on living out of tins? How many years before the supermarkets were emptied and the need to travel further afield became necessary and dangerous?

Her nervousness increased. She took down a couple of tins of beef and vegetable soup and contemplated what she would do with them. She thought of a casserole and had to hunt around until she found one. She tipped the contents of two of the cans into the pyrex dish and searched around until she found some tinned carrots and some sauerkraut.

She made quite a bit of noise—rattling a few dishes and pans here and there and generally bumping around the kitchen—but there was no sound from upstairs.

She began to get worried. She ran the palms of her hands nervously up and down her hips and wondered what she should do. There were so many things she didn't know or understand about Bleeker—on occasions such as this it seemed more than possible that he might have taken an overdose of some tablet he was not sufficiently familiar with.

Such was the tenor of her thoughts. She untied her apron and threw it onto the table and went out into the main room. The staircase beckoned. She couldn't wait any longer. And it was loneliness and fear and not only concern that sent her hurrying up the steps.

She walked towards the closed door of the study. She stopped and drew in a deep breath and knocked discreetly.

There was no answer.

She knocked again, a little louder and less perfunctory.

There was still no answer.

'Carl—are you all right?'

The door would not answer so she grasped the knob and turned it impatiently. It swung open easily. She stepped quickly through into the room—and took a step backwards in surprise.

It was like a museum. So huge that it dwarfed every other room in the house—that she remembered. But the rest was not her grandfather's great den. Shelves covered the three main walls from floor to ceiling; only the short wall on her left with its wide sweep of French windows remained as she remembered. And the shelves were packed tight with every size and shape of book imaginable and one whole wall was tiered with record albums. There were books scattered across the floor and books left stacked on tables and dressers and directly in front of her there was an array of record playing equipment such as might have been displayed by some enthusiastic department store a year or so ago. But there were no speakers visible anywhere.

Bleeker was sitting in an ornate wing chair over by the windows. He was not asleep but he was oblivious to her presence and she could see why: there was a pair of stereo headphones fixed over his ears and the cables ran from them to a small control console on the coffee table beside him. His eyes were glazed over blankly and she saw a record playing itself out on a turntable in front of him.

The musty odour of scholarship was heavy in the room.

She stood her ground, undecided, and where her knocking had not attracted his attention something else now did: he looked up from out of a dream and saw her standing there. For a moment he looked quite non-plussed, and then he groped for the headphones and took them off. He looked quite foolish.

'I'm sorry,' he apologised. 'I . . . I didn't hear you.'

He placed the headphones carefully on the coffee table and flicked a toggle on the amplifier. The squeaky chatter of music cut off and he looked up at her sheepishly.

She felt nervous and confused. 'Are you—are you all right? It's nearly six. I knocked on the door but . . .'

He got up, stretched, and walked over to the record player and switched it off. He was endeavouring to appear calm but she could sense that her sudden intrusion had made him uneasy.

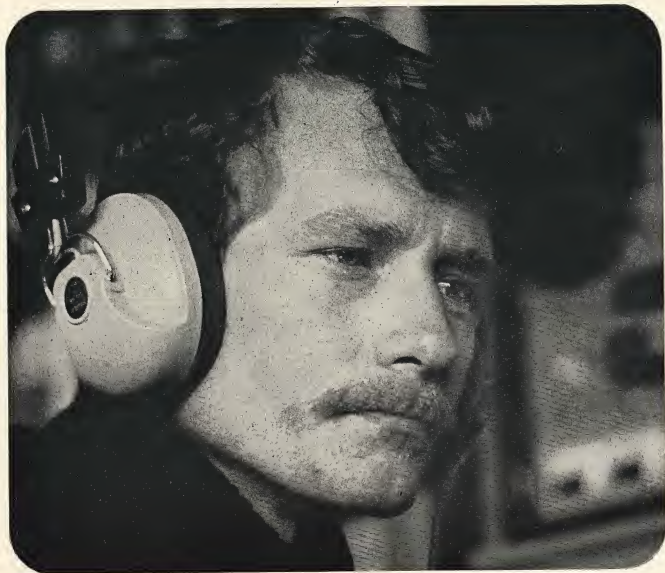
'Yes—I feel better now. I took some codeine and then I thought I'd take it easy for a while and listen to some music. I guess the time sort of crept away from me . . .'

He could not help noticing the way her eyes wandered wonderingly around the room; he leaned back against the cupboards that housed his audio equipment and said, with an attempt at light-heartedness, 'Well, I suppose you've discovered my little secret . . .'

But the meaning of what she saw was not yet clear and it remained for Bleeker to explain what the huge room implied.

'Sit down.' He motioned her towards a large cane chair in the centre of the room. 'Dinner can wait a while yet. There's . . . some things you need to know—about me, about this place, and it will take some time to explain . . .'

After it happened—after he got over feeling sorry for himself—he began to mourn the loss of all the beautiful things that man had made. It didn't seem fair that all that was fine in mankind should have perished along with all that had been unworthy—surely something could be done to



salvage something of this great heritage for the generations that would grow from the dazed handful of survivors struggling around the earth?

But Bleeker was no polymath. He was still young and of all the arts he had only begun to embrace literature and music and the latter intimately—with the ardour that only youth could summon. He loved music above all things and his knowledge of the field had already become encyclopaedic before the war—and in those dark and dreadful days that followed the plague he drew sustenance from this love and clung to it like a dying man and through it found the heart to survive. And when his eyes began to see around him again, and took in more than the unending desolation, and his aimless feet began to seek a proper direction, he found that his once dull and useless life had suddenly achieved a purpose it had too long been denied in the grubby, pencil-pushing offices he had frequented.

Of course the desperate part was that nobody else seemed to *care*. The few miserable people that he had found seemed too busy looting and indulging themselves in a senseless orgy of destruction to care about some sort of future—and most of them were either drunk or insane most of the time. Except for Carson—and that had been a mistake. His madness had only taken longer to incubate, and when it finally gained control of his thoughts he be-

came more dangerous to the future than to the disoriented present.

'Carson?' Deirdre looked up enquiringly. 'You've never mentioned him before...'

And Bleeker could have bitten off his tongue. He had intended to pass all reference to the self-styled King of Melbourne.

But she pursued the point. 'What was he like—did you know him well?'

'Well?' He grimaced. 'Why, we were born into this damned world together...'

They had both struggled back to life in the same silent hospital that had succoured them in the first few hours of the plague—and they had both faced the same terrifying discovery: the hospital had become part of a necropolis and its rooms were filled with the fetid odour of death. The corridors were crowded with corpses which had died with their limbs frozen in postures of intense agony; their sightless eyes still had the power to burn deep into Bleeker's numb mind.

He had somehow staggered and made his way down to street level and then had searched and found a basement cafeteria. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious but his stomach ached intolerably and thirst burned fiercely at his throat.

He stumbled through the cafeteria doorway and looked around him. His sick eyes slid over the rows of empty tables and finally alighted upon a figure hunched down over one on the far side of the room.

The only sound in the world was the frenzied animal noises this creature made as it worried away at the food in front of it. And then it sensed Bleeker's presence and looked up. He saw a haggard, dreadful face and wild exclaiming eyes.

They did not speak but continued to look at each other for the space of what might have been half a minute; and then with apparent disinterest the other man returned to his meal. Bleeker found that he could wait no longer and fumbled his way across the room and banged around in the cavernous kitchen until he found what he wanted.

He sat down at a table some distance from the other man and they ate in a silence punctuated only by the other man's grunts and his own clumsy chewing. The virus had sapped all but a vital ounce or two of their energy and they both realised that they would have to conserve what they had left, so they ate until they were satiated and Bleeker watched the other man light up a cigarette and lean back in his chair. Some of the madness had faded from his eyes and it now seemed possible to talk.

Hesitantly at first, and then with growing confidence as some of their strength returned, they exchanged what little knowledge they had, and afterwards they went outside to survey the ruined world.

He didn't dwell on the details. She had seen enough herself and knew what those first few days were like—but there were some important aspects of his own story he felt impelled to relate.

'We wandered around for a while but we were still pretty weak; so we moved into one of the big hotels at the top o' the town and tried to figure out what we should do...'

They kept their ears glued to a portable radio but all they heard was static—there didn't seem to be a solitary radio station operating anywhere on the continent. There were some clues in the last few newspapers they found; they read of the expanding war and of the possibility of Asian invasion—but there wasn't a mention of bacteriological weapons.

But of course there hadn't been *time*. The Asian missiles had carried a plague so virulent that less than twenty-four hours had been needed to bring the country to its knees—and there hadn't been enough time during the ensuing chaos for newspaper presses to turn. The world had come to an end in the space of a day and a night and there didn't seem much chance of re-building it.

It had been Carson's idea to break into the Telecommunications Centre and try and raise somebody overseas. He seemed to know quite a bit about electronics but Bleeker never questioned his ability. They got the emergency generator going and then played about with the transceivers. But the outside world seemed as dead as their own; they couldn't find another voice anywhere.

Until they accidentally locked on to the frequency of an orbiting satellite and a weary down-hearted voice came crackling through the stellar static.

'HEY, YOU GUYS DOWN THERE—ISN'T ANYBODY ALIVE? FOR PETE'S SAKE WHY DON'T YOU ANSWER?—I'VE BEEN WAITING DAYS FOR YOU TO MAKE SOME SORT OF CONTACT! GOD, BUT IT LOOKS AWFUL FROM UP HERE...'

Below him the blackened northern hemisphere rotated

malignantly in the pious sunlight.

'IS ANYBODY THERE...?'

It took them half an hour to establish proper contact and when they did the lonely astronaut was overjoyed.

'Hullo—this is Stan Carson and Carl Bleeker calling from Melbourne, Australia—We are civilians. I repeat—we are *civilians*. Are you hearing us? Are you hearing us...?'

He finally did—and broke into a rapturous welcome.

'HULLO MELBOURNE! HULLO MELBOURNE! THANK GOD TO BE ABLE TO HEAR A HUMAN VOICE AGAIN! JESUS, BUT THE PLACE LOOKS TERRIBLE FROM UP HERE. WHAT'S GOING ON DOWN THERE, ANYWAY?'

His words came and went erratically through the hissing static. Carson said, 'Are you American?'

'DO YOU THINK I SOUND LIKE A BLOODY RUSSKI?'

When his condition became more relaxed he revealed to them what once would have been classified information: he was the sole occupant of *Defense One*, a satellite sent up on the eve of the war and designed to plant cobalt missiles on potential aggressors—but the lonely astronaut had never had a chance to release his deadly cargo.

'THE DUMB BASTARDS HAVE LEFT ME UP HERE WITH A PRIMED BOMB AND IT WOULDN'T TAKE OFF—NOW WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THAT?'

One of the many gremlins which had dogged satellite development since the early sixties had managed to jam one of the cobalt missiles in one of the launching tubes—and there was no way of releasing it short of sending up a service ferry. And there wouldn't be any more of those for a long time—if ever. He was faced with a rather hopeless situation and they could do nothing to help him other than to ease his aching moments from transmission to transmission.

They kept up their two-way transmissions for several days, the astronaut's voice growing weaker as the full weight of his predicament was felt—and they knew that they could not help keep his sanity together for much longer.

Bleeker found that he was spending an increasing amount of time talking to the orbiting survivor while Carson prowled impatiently around the city looking for other survivors.

On the fifth or sixth day when the satellite once again curved into range the voice that finally fought its way through the overpowering static was weak and filled with a compassionate longing for a dead and distant Earth.

'I DON'T WANT TO DIE, BLEEKER, I DON'T WANT TO DIE. NOT LIKE THIS.' His mind was crumbling. 'WHY CAN'T YOU DO SOMETHING? HOW CAN YOU LET ME STAY UP HERE AND NOT DO ANYTHING? I DON'T WANT TO DIE. I'VE DONE NOTHING TO DIE FOR...'

And Carson, unable to stand the voice any longer, had grabbed the microphone from out of his hand and had shouted angrily, 'Well, you may bloody well have to, chum! For God's sake stop your bawling—it ain't any better for any of us down here!'

Bleeker sat back helplessly and watched him tear out the microphone and smash down the connection toggles on the transceiver.

'I just can't stand it any more,' he said. He was breathing heavily and his hands were shaking. 'I just can't *take* any

more of that . . .

He wandered aimlessly outside and left Bleeker nursing their guilt.

Later that afternoon he was wandering through the park when a searing light blossomed high overhead and burned fiercely for a few brief seconds and dimmed the setting sun to a clumsy coal. He had to shield his eyes from the blinding glare of what must have been an atomic explosion high up in the outer fringes of the atmosphere, and when the glare had faded to a pale pin point of light he thought of the lonely astronaut.

Had he found his release—had he found some way to detonate his deadly cargo and end his life defiantly, rather than face a long and agonizing death by starvation and the prospect of knowing that his mind would gradually devolve into insanity?

He could never be sure—but he would not be drawn back to the transceiver to listen and to hear if that wild young voice had been finally extinguished.

Dazed, he began to look around him for the first time and wondered what he could do with his strange new life. Carson had become morose and belligerent; some private demon goaded him, while Bleeker brooded upon the loss of heritage that would follow the Fall.

He went to the libraries and the museums and saw that the rats had already taken over. The surfeit of human flesh wasn't enough—they had to infest even the once sacred buildings and the nights were made eerie with their manic chattering.

He saw that the cities were dead and useless and his eyes turned to the nearby mountains for sanctuary. He told Carson of his plans; how they could salvage what they could from the libraries before the rats had taken over completely; how they could then transport these priceless books to some distant and well guarded haven somewhere in the Dandenongs; how they would move quickly while there was still time and preserve knowledge and tradition while the remainder of the world struggled to find its feet again.

But Carson wasn't interested; the beginnings of his megalomania were already evident. *You're nuts, Bleeker*, he had said, laughing. Even now the chill memory of his words and the cold glitter in his eyes came back to haunt him. *Who do you think's going to give a damn about your bloody books and your music? They'll be busy enough just keeping alive and making sure their stomachs are filled to worry about art . . .*

'It was obvious that we couldn't stay together,' he explained, and at this point his speech became a little hesitant, as though he was skipping over some incidents and avoiding others. 'Carson disappeared one morning and never came back. There was nothing I could do except go ahead with my plans . . .'

His initial endeavour was to find a truck and load it up with books and records and head for the mountains.

With his fears and his doubts to guide him he visited the great university libraries and raided the specialist record shops and took his prizes away from the dead city and the gnawing attention of rats and the wild carnivores creeping into the empty streets.

He hesitated over the art galleries and finally decided that there was little point in trying to accommodate everything. Knowledge was the starter and sometime in the future when the isolated bands were organised into some sort of civilised order then there would be a time for more

exertion. There was a limit to what his own small hands could do and the great wealth of the museums would wait a little longer. Others would learn from what he had done and follow his example—of that he felt confident. In a year or so—possibly longer—when the great battle to survive in some sort of organised group had been decided.

'And so here I am,' he finished, lamely.

She looked around the great room. 'And is this all there is, then?'

He smiled, and shook his head. 'No. The other two rooms—they used to be guest rooms, I think—well I'm using them as store rooms at the moment, until I get things sorted out a bit better. I'll show you later on if you like . . .'

'You've done quite a lot, haven't you,' she said admiringly. 'And what a trial it must have been choosing the right books . . .'

He watched her get up and move around in front of the bookshelves. 'Not so difficult,' he explained, 'when one keeps practical things in mind. I started with histories and just kept working my way through the essentials . . .'

And indeed there was an enormous range of historical works and biographies—but his perspicacity was extensive. Her eyes wandered across the spines at random. She saw volumes on winemaking, obstetrics, animal and plant husbandry, medicine—there was a shelf crammed with medical books that ran the length of one wall and it was dazzling in its coverage; there were books on science and mathematics and she couldn't help noticing that the bulk of this collection was given up to the social sciences—the ones most necessary to a people concerned with the simple business of survival—although the more esoteric sciences were marginally represented—perhaps there were more of these volumes in the other room; and there were books on botany and book-keeping and dentistry; on wildlife and electric motors; on herbs and contraceptives. He could not have thought of everything but he had cast a wide net to snare his prizes and he had had plenty of time to think about what might be needed; all the time in the world.

But she was pleased to see that the art of fiction had not been neglected; practicability had not obscured the necessity of art, although she wondered what relevance Dickens would have to the next generation—perhaps they would find more identification with the inner words of Hesse and Kafka and discover in Durrell and Burgess delightful escapist routes to a past they no longer understood or cared much about.

The poets were there, of course—Shakespeare crowding them on the shelves. What would this grave new world find in Goethe and Browning and Graves and Milton that would add meaning to their lives? She shrugged in her mind and found an answer—that the narrower focus of the poet's searchlight might illuminate small areas of experience for forthcoming generations in a way that the broader and stranger canvas of the novelist could not.

She turned from the books to the great wall of record albums on her right and marvelled anew at his thoughtfulness. Here Beethoven rubbed shoulders with Berg and this did not seem out of place; the great conductors and soloists of their time were represented in competitive versions so that listeners looking back upon this glorious heritage would have the benefit of hearing great music from many different aspects.

But she thought it curious that on all those crowded shelves she could not find one popular record or anything like folk music. Had Edith Piaf and Ewan McColl no place

in this world?

But there was so much crowding into her weary mind that the thought was pushed roughly aside for the time being.

She turned towards him. 'Carson—did you ever see him again after you left the city?'

He chose his words carefully and spoke with his face slightly turned towards the floor. 'Once—when I was foolish enough to drive into the main city area. I came across him while I was loading some provisions from one of the supermarkets. He had two other guys with him—miserable wretches; they looked lost and half-starved and scared out of their wits. Of what I couldn't make out. Perhaps it was Carson; he affected many that way. I noticed that they were all armed—pistols around their waists and a rifle apiece. I asked him why all the artillery and he just grinned and said, matter-of-factly, *Oh, they're just for self protection*. And winked—so help me, he winked! Like it was some sort of joke... but the only survivors I had seen scurrying through the dead city had seemed more concerned with looking after themselves than to worry about what anybody else was doing. Carson told me he was going to change all that—herd them together and get them organised—only he wouldn't tell me what for. Perhaps he hadn't worked out anything then, but I had a good idea of what he wanted to do: he wanted to take over.'

'And you never went back after that?'

He shook his head. 'I go into the suburbs occasionally—but no further. I don't think it's worth the risk...'

She studied the crowded walls thoughtfully. 'And what do you intend to do with all this?'

He seemed surprised that she had not guessed. 'Why, wait, I suppose.'

She frowned. 'Wait for what?'

He strode over towards the french windows and spoke with his back to her. 'Wait for the world, or what's left of it, to get organised again. I've got a radio... over there—' he gestured towards the audio complex—'and I listen for an hour or so each morning and afternoon waiting to hear some signs of resurgence—but I haven't had any luck so far. Of course the survival level in our country must have been appallingly low but other places must have fared better—and some of them will have more foresight than Carson.'

She wished she could believe that. 'Have you ever thought of trying to contact other survivors yourself?'

His back stiffened. And he would not face her. 'Are you crazy? Are you suggesting that I go out there looking for people? Good lord—you above anyone should know what it's like out there. Madness... utter madness...'

Slowly the ill-fitting jig-saw of his personality began to slide together.

He swung slowly around to look at her and his face had gone quite pale and he could not control the tremors of his hands. 'Deirdre... there's killers out there... *killers*...'

A few warm tears stung her eyes but moved no further. She looked away. 'Yes, I suppose there are...'

Later, while she prepared the dinner, he went around locking all the doors and windows on the ground floor and when she was ready he helped her upstairs with the plates and dishes and they dined in the great den. He brought a bottle of vintage white burgundy up from his cellar where it had been briefly chilled in the kerosene refrigerator. They dined and drank in a manner that now seemed alien and

antagonistic to the environment around them and afterwards Bleeker put a record on the player and offered her the headphones.

'It's Delius,' he said. 'The *Florida Suite*. Tell me if you like it...'

She allowed him to slip the miniature speakers over her head and let her ears focus upon the gently flowing melodies. The headphones were bulky but they were well padded and sat snugly against her ears. The music seemed to come from an area in the middle of her skull, somehow clinical and artificial.

Bleeker was smiling at her. She knew that if he spoke she would see his lips move and perhaps an odd word or two might sift in through the headphones. Their relationship had become more insular and she began to shake. She raised her hands and tugged the headphones off.

'If you don't mind,' she said, 'I think I'll turn in.'

He made no effort to detain her. 'Good idea.' It had been a tiring day for them both and he had not put the threat of Carson or the enigma of the natives from out of his mind. But he had done what he could. The house was securely locked and they had sufficient ammunition—all that was now needed was a long and sleepless night while he kept watch.

And later, lying in her bed and staring up into the darkness, she resented Bleeker and his dreams. Why should he have them when she had nothing? *Nothing*...

And not only a dreamer but a coward as well—this man she had chosen to protect her. But she could not laugh because she felt such compassion for his acts. Alone and unable to face up to the grim responsibilities of the new world he had locked himself up in a windowless ivory tower. She did not deny him his seclusion because he could not hurt anyone except himself—but she did deny him the right to insist that they orbit in their respective worlds but never come close enough for any genuine feeling to flow between them. Must they communicate only in analogies?

He was up there now, listening to his music, letting it soften the jagged teeth of the new world that gnawed away at his sanctuary. He was as happy as anyone could possibly manage; he had *something*.

And I have nothing, her mind cried out. *Nothing*...

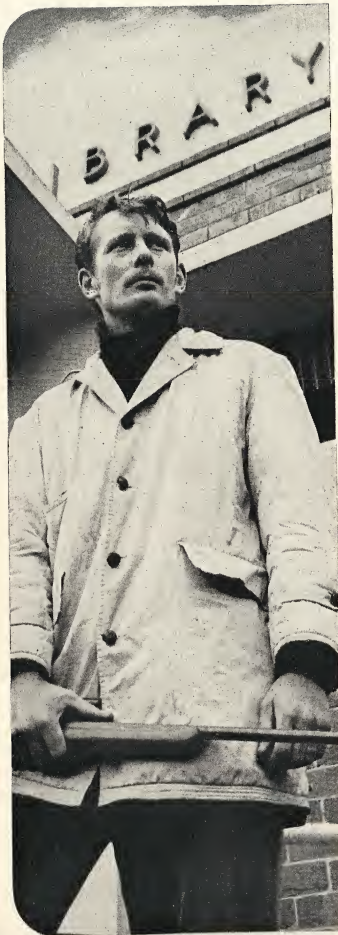
She curled up into a tight foetal ball and tried to crush the aching pit that burned inside her and tried to find sleep.

By morning the rain had eased off but the sky was still swollen and overcast; it was only a hiatus in the general downpour that might resume at any time.

The girl was up first. Bleeker came downstairs much later than usual. He had fallen reluctantly asleep some time before dawn and only his concern for their safety had roused him several hours later. He seemed morose and unsettled and allowed her to make breakfast. There was no communication between them. She had spent the long unsettled night sleeping in short, fitful fragments; now her eyes were darkly circled and there was little sign in her eyes of the hope that had burned briefly less than a few hours previously. For the first time she had realised that Bleeker's fears dived much deeper than her own and that he was unable to cope with the problems thrown up by the outside world.

'Do you feel better this morning?' she asked, but her voice was uninvolved and the words mere courtesy.

He regarded her across the table like a confused little boy. His face was deathly pale and he seemed in need of



some nourishment that his food could not provide.

'Oh, all right I guess.'

'Do you think they're still hanging around?'

He looked startled. 'Who?'

'The aborigines,' she snapped, impatiently. His bumbling inarticulateness had begun to annoy her. 'Do you think they're still here?'

He shook his head. 'I don't know. I don't think so. But I do know that the Dandenongs were once their richest hunting ground in all Victoria. They'll tend to . . . to gravitate back here. Of course it will be many years before the game increases to any worthwhile degree but . . . they'll be here. All the time. The question is—what will they do about us—and what can we do about them?'

But it wasn't the blacks that worried him but the devil he knew. Were Carson and his band still combing the countryside—or had they gone back to the city? It was the latter that he hoped for most fervently—the natives he would deal with as the situation arose.

Bleeker spent all day upstairs. He used up most of his free time investigating the classics and reading purposefully; now that he had the time his mind had become a vast repository into which he crammed as much information as he could for the generations to come. He was convinced that they would have need of him; and this was madness of a subtle and most corrosive kind.

Slowly she became aware that she was imprisoned—and that she shared her wardenship with a strange young man; but only she held the key to her prison. She had been lonely when she had first arrived at the house but that was nothing compared to the agonising pain that now possessed her.

In the beginning she had prepared herself nervously for the demands that would be made upon the promise of her body—in normal times such a situation would have been obvious; in this lonely and inhospitable world it seemed painfully so. But instead he had ravished her with words, her willing attention the lance that had pierced the ripe swelling of his dreams and unleashed them in a stumbling torrent of words.

There were moments when she had considered him effeminate and this in itself was not reprehensible if only he had tried to join them together in some sort of friendship—but she now realised that he was possessed of a passion for art and music and literature that had been deepened and strengthened by the global catastrophe and his long lonely exile.

Her thoughts seethed along these lines all day long. She waited and he did not come down for lunch; she waited and he gave no sign of being interested in his evening meal. His music and his task possessed him.

She could not go on. Something had to give. And when she could not stand the corkscrewing tension any longer she ran upstairs.

She didn't knock this time. She opened the door and walked straight into the room. And stopped.

He was sitting in the same chair with the same blissful far-away look in his eyes as yesterday. The headphones were clamped down over his ears and he was lost in the cage of sound that nursed and protected him from the outside world.

She didn't say a word but walked over and angrily switched off the turntable. The record ground to a stop and the silent exclamation in Bleeker's eyes as he looked up

registered annoyance, and then confusion, and finally the beginnings of guilt.

He said, quietly, 'What did you do that for?'

'Do you have to listen to those damned records all day?' she screamed, every nerve in her body close to breaking point. 'What's the matter with you—the sun's been shining today, or haven't you noticed? And do you care? Sometimes I think that you're all talk and that you don't give a damn about anything or anybody...'

He got up from the chair and made as if to walk towards her but thought better of it. He stood like a helpless marionette waiting for somebody else to will him to move. His hands trembled visibly.

'I... I'm sorry if you're... upset. But there's no need to get worked up like that. Surely...'

'Oh, for Pete's sake!' She swung away from him. She could not bear to look at his pale and frightened face. Her eyes stung with tears but they were born of frustration and not of sadness. 'We've been cooped up in here for two days—do you expect us to go on like this forever; to live like this the rest of our lives?'

'It's safer than being out there.'

'Fine. Fine. But is it better?' The momentum of her anger had slowed down. She eyed him dispassionately. 'Do you really want to spend the rest of your life like this—here, in this house, doing what you do?'

'I... I can't really say. Of course one doesn't know... what one will be doing—in the future. One can only wait and, I believe, hope. No sense thinking about tomorrow until it arrives... is there? In the meantime I have my work...'

'Your work.' She spat the word out unpleasantly. 'Is that what you call it? Well, it seems to me, Mr. Bleeker, that you're using this dream of yours to hide behind. You talk about waiting for the world to re-organise itself. Well, what are you doing to help that day along? And have you ever tried to figure out how long that would take—particularly if everybody's as miserable and afraid and as foolhardy as yourself? I'll tell you—it could take more than years—it could take a century. There may be another dark age and several more after that, with people struggling just to keep alive—and what do you think your books and your music will mean to them? Of course, you'll be dust long before then!'

He was visibly shaken. Cracks were already beginning to appear in the careful façade he had built up for his own protection. 'But that doesn't matter,' he protested. 'It doesn't matter if I'm alive or not—what does matter is that some of *this* survives; that it will be there when the time of rediscovery begins; that I will have made this possible.'

She looked at him wonderingly and shook her head. 'And you've never considered that while all this is happening the coming generations will have evolved their own music, their own literature, their own art forms—and what use will all this dead stuff be to them when they can no longer understand it and it seems quaint and barbaric?'

Her words had the capacity to shock him. He stared at her disbelievingly; he did not want to believe because if he did then he wouldn't be safe any more.

At that moment she felt quite sorry for him and her anger evaporated—but the gulf yawned unclosed between them. She took a step towards him, stopped, and held out both hands in friendship.

'Carl, we found each other. Where there's two there must be more. Why don't we just try, together, to find

them? We can't stay here forever; we'll rot. But out there—out there, there's a chance we may not be alone, that Carson and his type are *not* the only people left; that somewhere there's people like you and me who think and feel the way we do—but they're too scared out of their wits to do anything about it. Why can't we try—and give *them* a lead?'

The mention of Carson's name brought a heavier pall over his thoughts. 'And what if there *are* others like us? There's bound to be conflict between them and the predators before some useful form of government is established. Well, I'm no freedom fighter, Deirdre. Why should I throw my life out onto the open market? I wouldn't have the faintest idea of how to defend myself in that sort of combat. Better for me to do what I can do well and understand and leave the fighting to those more and better equipped than myself.'

'You're a bloody pacifist!'

He managed a weak sort of smile. 'That was once considered a virtue. And pacifists didn't make this mess.'

'And they're not likely to get us out of it, either.' Oh, but she was so confused! Her mind was grating without purpose and all she could see was hopelessness and defeat all around them; he would not understand.

'It would be a lot easier to accept your motives, Carl, if I could really believe in them. But I can't. And I never shall. No matter how noble you try to make yourself you just can't convince me that you've gone to all this trouble just for the good of mankind. What you really like is being tucked away up here all nice and cosy with your books and your records and well away from the nasty old world—and all this talk about planning for the future sounds like so much self-subterfuge. But you could have *told* me; you could have explained all this before you asked me to stay. You could have saved so much... so much *wasted time*.'

That was enough. She had nothing more to say—so she left him standing impotent and foolish and went back downstairs.

She didn't bother cooking that evening. *The hell with him*. And besides, she didn't feel the slightest bit hungry; her insides were in turmoil.

But her mind was clear at last. She could no longer accept Bleeker's crazy dreams and his frustrating antipathy. She knew that the outside world was fraught with unknown dangers and that he had made her feel weak and dependent again—but now the loneliness of the dead continent seemed hardly more terrifying than the loneliness she had endured within these wooden walls.

Better to spend one year of freedom in a dangerous and inhospitable world than a lifetime cooped up in an ivory tower not of her own making.

In the morning she was gone.

Bleeker wandered downstairs shortly after eight o'clock; bleary-eyed and only half awake. He went straight into the kitchen and found the table unprepared with the feminine attention to detail he had become accustomed to.

A dirty coffee cup stared back at him. A saucer full of cigarette butts puzzled him. He had never seen the girl smoke before. The percolator was still warm, but of Deirdre there was no sign.

The house was unnaturally quiet.

'Deirdre?'

He went out on to the porch. The sun was shining from out of an unsure sky. 'Deirdre?'

There was no answer. A twinge of apprehension knotted his stomach. He went back inside.

He knocked on her door but there was no answer. He pushed it open and went inside. The bed was made; there was nothing to indicate that it had ever been slept in. There wasn't an item of her clothing visible anywhere.

It took several long and painful moments for the truth to finally sink in. He remembered the recriminations that had passed between them the night before, but that she had left him without a word of explanation seemed hardly fair.

And while he stood leaning against the door jamb he could feel the slow and insidious return of that *other* loneliness—the one he had known and feared before... before *she* had come to share it.

Already a subtle change had crept over the house, as though she had taken something vital with her, something without which these old timers were already assuming a cold and unfriendly manner.

He walked around the house in a daze, calling her name and making a great deal of noise; trying to convince himself that she had only gone out for a walk, to ease her temper. But it didn't work. The truth was much too obvious. He thought of getting out the Toyota and going after her, but dismissed the idea as impracticable. What could he say that would bring her back? Only what he should have said before... and it was too late for misgivings. Why had he made such a mess of everything?

He wondered what she would do. Get a car as quickly as possible, he supposed, and then put as much distance between herself and Melbourne as she could. She'd probably head up the coast towards Sydney and see if things were any better up there. Anything was better than standing still.

Had *he* said that?

But his mind bubbled with confusion. He no longer knew *what* to think: his carefully controlled world was flying apart.

Lost in his hurt and his delusions, he did not even hear the sound of heavy traffic coming up the highway, nor the eager, excited cries from outside and the heavy footfalls on the porch. Only when the front door banged unceremoniously open did he draw back from the gulf of unreason.

He swung around, almost knowing what he would find before he saw the men crowding into the open doorway. A wide, swarthy figure in a sheep-skin coat kept them from spilling forward into the room.

'Hullo, Carl. Nice to see you...'

There was a roaring in Bleeker's ears and his vision blurred.

It was Carson: who else?

'You look rather pale.' His visitor hefted a heavy shotgun and moved into the room. 'Been pushing yourself too hard?'

It was the hard unkindly laughter he remembered most of all. But he made himself speak. 'I never expected to see you here.'

'No. I suppose not.' Carson had been eating well—some would say too well. His body bulged arrogantly like a clumsy beast gorged with excess. His face had fleshed out and heavy jaws made his features look coarse and grotesque. A dirty stubble stained his cheeks; his thick great moustache curled like a rotten proscenium over the ugly stage of his face. He seemed in no mood for nonsense. Something dark and urgent had brought him to this place.

Outside he could hear the sounds of heavy trucks moving up from the highway. Carson cocked his head sideways and smiled an oily, evil smile. 'Don't be alarmed, neddly. That's only my boys. I got them to wait until we were here. No sense in taking unnecessary chances...'

Bleeker tried hard to look as relaxed as they might have expected him to be, under the circumstances; but it was a pitiful gesture, and he knew it. 'Are you looking for somebody?'

Carson winked. It was a sly, unsettling expression. 'Maybe. You alone here?'

He heard the men alighting outside and wondered how many of them there were. There were four or five faces crowding around behind Carson. He heard more footsteps coming up the porch steps, and what little strength he had left faded away to nothing. The situation was quite hopeless. He wondered how much time he had left, and instead of his whole life crushing down upon him he found that only Deirdre's face returned to comfort him. His muscles tensed.

'I said,' Carson repeated, and with a terrible edge to his words, 'are you *alone* here?'

'Yes... of course,' Bleeker stammered, glad that he didn't have to lie. 'Why do you ask?'

'No reason.' Carson's eyes moved to the stairs and narrowed.

'What's up there?'

Bleeker shrugged. 'Just some things of mine.'

'Mind if I take a look?'

His answer was unnecessary. Carson motioned two of the men inside to keep an eye on him and then advanced up the stairs. Bleeker could hear him rummaging about for some time before he reappeared.

The two goons looking after him were nervous and ill-at-ease—but their hands never wavered from their weapons.

'Nice little place you have here,' Carson commented, and then smiled. 'You really are some sort of nut, aren't you?'

Bleeker looked away. In the face of such veiled hostility there was literally nothing he could say that was valid.

'You always did want something like this, didn't you?' Carson nudged him with the muzzle of his shot-gun. 'A quiet little place where you could see that the world's great heritage was preserved?'

Bleeker said nothing.

'Oh well, I suppose it keeps you out of mischief and out of harm's way—what more could one want?'

He motioned the other two men outside and then put one hand around Bleeker's shoulders in mock friendship. And Bleeker could not stop his flesh from cringing and he wondered if this much was evident to his interrogator.

'You haven't changed much, Carl. Guess you've been taking things easy, eh?' He stroked Bleeker's cheek affectionately and the young man fought hard to stop the terrible memories from flooding back. 'Well, no sense in over-exerting oneself, is there?' He gave Bleeker a playful dig in the ribs and moved away.

'I suppose they're your boys out there,' Bleeker said, quickly, trying to get the conversation on firmer ground.

Carson swung around. The playful smile would not leave his face. 'Some of them. The others are out in the trucks.'

'How many?'

'Now what do you want to know that for? Got a little army of your own?' He laughed. 'Now that would *really* surprise me.'

'What's all the artillery for?'

'You mean this?' He held out the shot-gun. 'Why, that's a mere detail. In those army trucks out there I've got enough fire power to hold off several armies—not that there's ever likely to be any—except *mine*. Call it protection, if you like. A man can't be too careful these days—can he?'

Bleeker walked slowly towards the door and looked out. There were two dun-coloured trucks waiting outside and six men standing with their legs braced and with rifles and shot-guns in their hands. They looked very lonely and afraid of something.

'How did you find me?'

'Oh, that was easy. An old friend of yours in Croydon—I think his name was Kelly.'

Bleeker started.

'Yes—we bumped into him a few days ago on our way up the coast. You know, a little exploratory venture. Nothing up there I'm afraid; nothing *alive*, that is. We went as far as Eden and then turned around. Thought that the old man was a nice little guy so we decided to look him up just once more. Took a hell of a while to find him—but find him we did.'

'And he told you . . . where I was?'

'Yes; yes he did. Must have overlooked it the first time.'

Bleeker closed his eyes. A cold piece of steel seemed to have pierced his heart. He knew that the old man would never have divulged his whereabouts unless . . . *unless* . . . But his mind would not give in to the truth.

Carson gauged the nature of his reaction and his eyes narrowed. 'Well, I guess I'd better be moving off, I suppose. Can't keep the little lads waiting.'

He stepped out onto the porch and looked back at the young man. 'What's the matter, Bleeker? You don't look so good?'

'What . . . what did you do to them?'

'Do? To *who*?'

Bleeker gestured aimlessly with one hand. 'Kelly . . . his wife . . .'

'Oh, them. I killed them. And a good job, too. That old woman is better off that way and he probably appreciates what we did and . . .'

Bleeker covered his mouth with one hand and bit into the pale flesh of his fist. He closed his eyes and only a faint, whimpering sound pressed past his clenched lips.

'Oh, now don't take it so *hard*,' Carson said, and there was rising menace in his words. 'And tell me, where's the girl?'

Bleeker looked up. 'Girl?'

'Yes: girl, girl, girl, GIRL. You know, what's-er-name; the chick who's been shackled up with you for the last couple of days.'

He wanted to be sick; to vomit up all the stale black stuff that boiled inside him. The world no longer had any meaning. Only death and Carson mattered; the rest was dross.

'What girl?' he mumbled. 'Surely . . . surely you don't think I've got a *woman* up here, do you? I mean . . .'

Carson grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him out onto the porch. The men below tensed expectantly. 'Now come off it Carl—we know each other too well to *lie* to each other. You have got a girl up here somewhere, haven't you? She's probably the same one Jigger saw driving through Melbourne a few days ago, like a bat out of hell; wouldn't even stop to say hello or kiss my arse. Kelly told us she was here—and we found her car a little way down the road. Someone had done a patchy job of trying

to hide it—it wouldn't have been *you*, would it Carl? I don't *like* deception.'

But Bleeker could not speak. His own madness had stopped up his tongue and there was a dark blight upon his thoughts.

'Look at it this way,' Carson began, friendly like. 'You know how it is. None of us have seen a real live woman since the war. They're gonna be real scarce items from now on—so can you see the sense of any guy keeping one all to himself when there's all these other poor fellows anxious for a little bit? Now that doesn't sound *fair*, does it? I mean, the logical thing is to make them communal property and that way nobody gets left out—you get me?'

Bleeker thought for what seemed an eternity but the patient expression on the other man's cruel face told him that it had been much less than that. He shook his head. 'Look, I told you—I'd like to help you Stan, but I haven't seen a woman since—'

Carson's fist swung impatiently and Bleeker's skull exploded in pain. He reeled and toppled over and fell down the porch steps into the mud. He groped his way to his knees and looked up at the semi-circle of hungry faces staring down at him. Painfully, he struggled to his feet.

Somebody grabbed him roughly from behind and held his arms pinned tightly together. Carson stepped forward and there was murder in his eyes.

'Listen, Carl, I'm not *crazy*, I'm not *stupid*. I can smell woman all over this place. Where *is* she?'

He shook his head. 'I don't know.' In spite of the pain he knew that he must maintain ignorance; so that she would have the time to get further away from this place and the contagion that had descended upon it. And the beautiful part was that he *didn't* know where she was, that no matter what they did to him they would never find out; perhaps that was why he smiled.

His head snapped suddenly to one side—and back again. Carson swung a series of open-handed blows back and forth, back and forth, using the report of the blows to underline his demands.

'Do you think I'm *dumb*; do you think I'm *stupid*—that I don't *know* she's been here? She has, *hasn't* she—been here? Don't *lie* to me, Carl. Don't *ever* . . . *lie* . . . to . . . me . . .'

And then, mercifully, it was over. His legs gave way beneath him and they let go; somebody swore and he fell into the mud.

Carson was thorough. Somebody got a bucket of water and sloshed it into his face. He came awake gasping and they hauled him to his feet and held him, only half-conscious this time, while Carson ranted.

'We'll find her, Carl, oh, we'll *find* her. Don't doubt that for a moment—and when we *do* . . .'

Bleeker was incapable of answering. He was too weak, too bruised, too beaten to do anything but hate, deeply and quietly; an emotion more powerful than anything he had known since the war and it burned and scorched a corridor into his sanity.

Carson leaned forward and grabbed a fistful of his wet shirt. 'I could *kill* you, Bleeker. But I don't want to; that's too *easy*. I want you around for a long while to come and I *don't* want you to ever lie to me again—you understand that?'

Bleeker nodded.

'I want to *hurt* you, Carl. I want you to know what it's like to die and still be alive, so that you'll know better than

to lie to me.'

He jerked a thumb towards the house and spoke to one of his men. 'Burn it. Burn it to the ground. Every inch of it. Burn it.'

The man ran back to one of the trucks and reappeared lugging what looked like a spray pack. Bleeker watched all this like a detached observer. It was only when the man stood carefully back from the house and aimed the nozzle at the weatherboards and ignited the flame-thrower, that he realised what was going to happen.

He struggled weakly against the hands that held him. 'Don't... for God's sake—you can't do it!'

A great gout of flame belched from the nozzle and ate into the house. Within seconds the entire front was ablaze, and the flames roared exultantly and raced on to engulf the remainder of the house.

He tried desperately to reach them, to stop them. The hands released him and he staggered forward and pitched onto his face in the mud. Someone had tripped him. Someone laughed. He couldn't find the strength to get up.

The house roared and sputtered and the man with the flame-thrower worked his way around the walls at a careful distance. The other men laughed and backed away from the intolerable heat. It would soon become an inferno.

'Can't... do... it,' he mouthed into the wet ground. 'Can't...!' And he began to cry like a child whose best toy has been taken from him. His head was shielded to some extent from the heat, but so great was his pain that he did not even acknowledge it.

Carson looked down at him and placed one heavy foot underneath him and rolled him over. With his distorted vision Bleeker could only discern a hazy figure standing over him... and the sharp, cruel barrels of a shot-gun only inches from his face.

'Let this be a lesson to you, Bleeker: never lie to me again!'

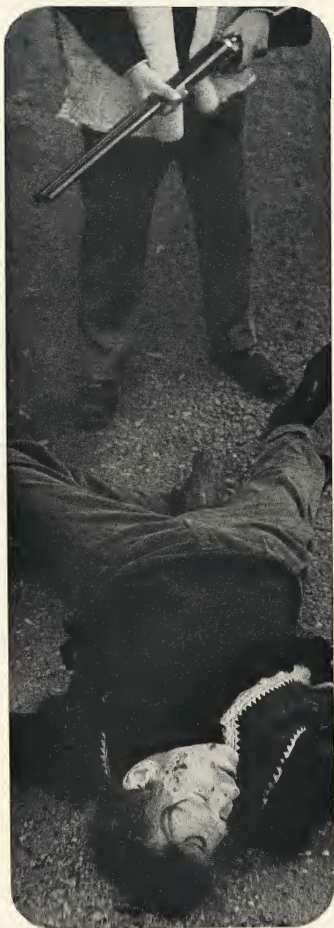
He didn't see the boot when it swung in a short, savage arc at his groin; but he felt the terrible explosion of pain that followed. He screamed and his head fragmented; the fragments a thousand razor-sharp pieces that tore at his mind and finally slashed him into unconsciousness.

The house burned fiercely, roaring and sputtering like an angry beast. The men climbed back into the trucks and drove off.

Ages later he woke. He opened his eyes and managed to sit up. The world reeled around him and finally came to a stop. The pain in his groin had ebbed to a dull ache that swamped all the other small pains in his body. His lungs were filled with acrid, bitter smoke and he began to cough. He couldn't see more than a few yards through the great pall of smoke and he flinched from the curling tongues of flame that lapped towards him.

He began crawling in what he supposed was the direction of the highway. The fire had spread to some of the nearby branches but they would only burn while the house sent up great sheets of flame. The bush was too soaked, too drenched with the recent rain to give more than token agreement to the inferno—but the wet wood gave off thick, dense smoke and he found it difficult to see where he was going.

He kept the flames behind him and crawled and stumbled through the mud until the undergrowth brushed his face and he felt a little safer. He managed to find his feet and leaned against a tree and looked back into the thickening



smoke. Even as he watched there was a thunderous crash and the remaining walls of the house fell in and sent a great shower of sparks into the air.

It was all gone. Almost a year of work destroyed in one senseless sadistic act. His fingers curled into angry little fists. They had murdered his dream and for that he would never forgive them—and for the deaths of harmless old Kelly and his wife there would be some sort of reparation.

And he would start again—find some other place more protected than the old weatherboard house he had originally chosen; and then he would begin all over again. He would build up the library and then he would—

But he found that his madness had left him. His thoughts faltered and he realised that Deirdre had been right. Dead art was only fit for scholarship—what really mattered was keeping art and knowledge alive on the lips of living people. That was more important than scholarship.

He was a hobbyist, a dilettante. He could only read and collect the thoughts of others—and have them destroyed by a madman's fit of anger. If art was to survive unto the next generation then it would have to be carried in the minds and the hearts of those best suited for such a precious burden. Why hadn't he seen that before? *Why?*

He was a spectator. He couldn't perform or create a solitary thing and on his own he was more worthless than any predator.

He spoke her name aloud.

'Deirdre...'

But she was gone.

The pain in his body no longer seemed important. He gave one last lingering look at the gutted and burning house and then, like somebody shrugging off the useless burden of a dream, he set out to find her.

Later, when the smoke had cleared a little and the fire had died down, there was movement in the surrounding bush, and one by one the black figures emerged cautiously from the wet undergrowth. They fanned out around the still burning remains of the house and stood watching the sputtering ashes.

It had been raining for many days now and it had become impossible to find dry wood,—and the fire sticks would not work in such a moist atmosphere. But tonight there would be fire to cook their fresh kill and roast wallaby meat to pass around the hungry camp and, if they were careful and nurtured the flame, why it would be so again tomorrow and the day after that.

They moved in upon the gutted house and carefully withdrew some of the smouldering bits of wood, and scooped up some of the glowing ashes and tipped them into pallets made out of wet leaves, and bound them so that they could be safely carried back to their mountain camp.

Overhead the clouds had begun to break up and disperse. The sun had won back the sky.

And when they had finished their work they stepped back, took one last careful look around them, and glided back into the smoke-shrouded forest as quietly as they had come.

THE MERIT AWARD

Each issue, VISION OF TOMORROW will pay to the author of the leading story in that issue, as determined by the readers' votes, a bonus in addition to our regular rate. In this way, we will reward authors of outstanding stories, and provide extra incentive to create better fiction for our readers.

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.....LOST IN TRANSLATION by Peter Cave
.....TRANSFERENCE by K. W. Eaton
.....THE CUSTODIAN by Lee Harding
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FANTASY REVIEW

THORNS

By Robert Silverberg

Published by Rapp & Whiting at 25s.

Reviewed by Kathryn Buckley

It would be all too easy to be deafened by the roar of extravagant praise which abounds in science fiction, to the merits of the solid body of work by authors who can be relied upon to provide highly professional, competent books.

THORNS by Robert Silverberg is such a book, which moves well and tells an entertaining and enjoyable story. A variation on the eternal triangle it concerns Lona Kelvin, an orphan who (in the name of science) becomes the technical mother of 100 children. Minner Burris, a space traveller captured by aliens who take him apart, and then cannot put him back together again in quite the right way, and lastly Duncan Chalk, an emotional vulture.

Chalk brings Lona and Minner together so that he can have a feast on their miseries and then serves it up thinly disguised as entertainment to an audience of millions. As a character he is so exaggeratedly evil as to be unbelievable but part of his unpleasantness lies in the fact that he is an exaggeration and that there are people who seem to thrive on bitchiness, both their own and other people's.

The psychological effects of deformity and disfigurement are highly complex and profound. As a study in character this would be meaty stuff for a Dostoevskys or a Henry James, so that to say that it is superficial and unconvincing should be looked at in this light.

On the level of an adventure story, Minner is sufficiently realistic but to those readers who, like myself, have personal acquaintance with this kind of affliction (which can be seen as an exaggeration of the thalidomide tragedy, bearing in mind that one cannot say that the suffering of a man who loses both legs is double that of a man who loses one leg, the subject being far more profound and complex) the most that can be said is that the author has made a capable stab at it, and at least recognises the values of compassion as distinct from pity.

Just how convincing Lona appears will depend on how sentimental you are about motherhood. The kind of experiment the author envisages would hardly be likely to make a woman feel she was the mother of one hundred children, though given the callous treatment with which she is surrounded she might well feel used and discarded. Frequently maternal feelings are not fully aroused until after association between mother and child, as the law recognises. Lona comes over initially as a rather insipid naive girl not even capable

of committing suicide efficiently. It is arguable whether such naïveté could persist after her experience but after meeting Minner she does mature and grow.

Minner, though we are told he is a very strong character, does not possess the same flexibility and confuses Lona's lack of knowledge with lack of intelligence, an everyday mistake all too easily made. Lona is in fact very intelligent and proves the more able to cope with life. It would be nice to feel that this is due to diabolical cleverness on the part of the author.

The fact that Robert Silverberg has chosen to deal with deformity in its psychological aspects makes his book a little unusual in science fiction. Advances in medical science paradoxically ensure the survival of larger numbers of both physically and mentally deformed children and carry the risk of thalidomide tragedies. It is not only the individuals concerned but also society itself which must come to terms with human deformity. We either shut them away in convenient homes or like Duncan Chalk feast hypocritically on them as freaks, but seem unable to accept them as human beings.

It is a hopeful sign that science fiction writers are now attempting to treat their ideas in terms of human reactions and if they are not always successful it should be remembered that only a small proportion outside this field are successful on this level.

Although THORNS is not in the heavy weight class, it is nonetheless refreshingly unpretentious and straightforward. The style though not inspired is professional and if the denouement is not particularly subtle it is satisfying plotwise and the loose ends are neatly tied up. In short the sort of science fiction which makes up the backbone above which the few giants can tower.

THE JOURNAL OF PARAPHYSICS

Edited by B. Herbert, M.Sc., B.A.(Oxon)

Reviewed by Don Malcolm

I read four numbers from Vol. 3 of this little production and found the articles interesting, authoritative and objective. Readers with a scientific bent would enjoy dipping into the Journal.

I use the word 'dipping' deliberately. Not all the articles are equally readable. For example, 'Holistic Aspects of Structural Physical Units' is unlikely to appeal to anyone who does not have a degree in physics.

Articles about parallel universes, the existence of other natural satellites of the Earth, the excavations at Cadbury Castle (possibly site of Arthur's Camelot) and researches into telepathy, telekinesis and the other psi phenomena, are more in keeping with sf themes. It does no harm to check occasionally and see how the products of writers' imagination tallies with current scientific evidence.

It is a decision for the individual reader. Whether you buy or borrow this publication, you will learn something new.

Donald Malcolm

THE WORLD JONES MADE

By Philip K. Dick

Panther Science Fiction. 160pp. 5s.

Reviewed by Don Malcolm

When I was about four or five, I lived beside a carpenter's workshop owned by a portly, jolly man with the improbable nickname of Spongerina. I was free to wander around in that world of martyred trees, tools and shavings.

The thing that fascinated me most was the circular saw: relentless, exquisitely-honed, shining with steely competence.

Philip K. Dick's novel is a literary circular saw, slicing its way through some science fiction conventions at a breathtaking and exciting pace.

At first sight, the elements of the story seem commonplace. The world of 1995 is slowly trying to recover from an atomic war. The radiation has produced mutants. There is a secret police, Secpol, working for a united Federal Government, whose policy is one of Relativism. Under this politico-philosophical system, even mutants, no matter how freakish, are full and equal members of society.

A man could believe anything he likes; but if he voices an absolute opinion, he has to be able to prove it, or he takes a long holiday in a forced labour camp.

Apart from the natural 'sports', there is a small group living under controlled conditions in Dr. Rafferty's Refuge.

And there are mysterious objects from interstellar space, which are approaching the Earth.

Against this background, we find Cussick, a zealous Secpol agent, and Jones, a mutant who can prophesy major events for a year ahead.

Cussick firmly believes in Relativism. He sees it as the salvation of a world plagued for too long by individuals, groups or ideologies claiming that their particular idea is Absolute truth, to the exclusion of all others. He abhors the misery and death that stem from the attempted imposition and enforcement of such ideas.

Unfortunately, most people have definite opinions about almost everything and they aren't slow to defend what they think is right. And from the small acorns of personal conflict grow the great oaks of war.

Governments can't legislate against human nature (although they keep on trying: witness the Race Relations Act and some of its ludicrous consequences). Cussick might not realise that. But his wife, Nina, does.

'I just can't seem to get interested in Relativism', she says. However, unlike so many women today, she is not merely a political drop-out, content to confine her life to home, family and the price of detergents, as we shall see.

Nor does she approve of Cussick's Secpol job. 'I just wish you were in something else. In the showcase business. Or even dirty postcards. Anything you can be proud of.'

Priceless dialogue, that!

'I'm proud of this,' her husband replies. He sees him-

self as the town dogcatcher, the Symbol of Authority. But he is neither pompous nor boring in his unswerving support of the political system and his part in preserving it. For him, Security is the lesser of two evils.

Floyd Jones is a man who lives a double life, both of them the same. His 'gift' enables him to see a particular event in the future. Then he has to fill in the time until the event happens. It's like sitting through a film twice and knowing the second time around what's coming. Jones fiercely resents his ability, for it robs him of the necessary element of uncertainty in life.

Dick is careful to point out that: '... specific details grow dim and I get nothing at all.'

As he has no choice, he sets out to destroy Fedgov and set himself up as master of the planet.

Cussick first meets him at a carnival, where most mutants make their living by exhibiting their physical and mental talents. They say it's a strong stomach that has no turning. Some of Dick's monsters could easily give you a head start. Cussick is attracted by a fortune-teller, whose sign reads 'The Future of Mankind (No Personal Fortunes).' Jones forecasts that a political unknown will become the next Council chairman. Also, he says that the space objects—drifters—are alive, a fact known to, but suppressed by, Fedgov.

Conscientiously, Cussick reports the conversation to his superiors. Both Pearson, chief of Secpol, and Kaminski, the Senior Political Instructor, think he is overzealous, until he mentions Jones' remark about the drifters.

When the political prophecy comes true, Jones is arrested. Secpol have to release him—as he has foreseen—even although they know that he will reveal the true nature of the drifters. Jones says that the drifters want Earth, the only fertile planet in the Solar System. And he is going to ensure that they fail.

The Secpol men know that, if Jones is allowed to carry out his plans, Fedgov must fall. They are hamstrung by their own laws. Pearson admits to a good old-fashioned Gestapo urge to ram an A-pellet down Jones' throat.

Upon his release, Jones arranges to put his organisation, Patriots United, into top gear, with the help of wealthy and influential people.

His gift of prophecy makes it simple for him to persuade the populace that he does indeed know best. He urges his followers to destroy the drifters, in defiance of the law protecting them.

Nina leaves Cussick and joins the Patriots. And Kaminski, who has been doing a bit of crystal-gazing himself, tried to do a deal with the Patriots, but is captured and sent to a labour camp. Cussick gets his job and learns the truth about the mutants in the Refuge.

Pearson determines to crush Jones' organisation. Many party members are detained. An assassination attempt on Jones fails and precipitates the very thing it was designed to prevent, the destruction of Fedgov.

Before his arrest, Pearson orders Rafferty to send the

Refuge mutants to Venus, in two specially-prepared ships. This action would not rank as a major event and Jones would know nothing about it.

The Crisis Government comes to power.

The Refuge mutants and Venus play important parts in the story. I think that Philip Dick has been both careless and unlucky with this section.

The mutants crash-land on Venus. 'The chamber was a shambles, crumpled in as if some Behemoth had trod on it.' And: 'The ship had been ripped open like an over-inflated bladder.'

The mutants have been carefully nurtured in the Refuge. Pearson has had two special ships at stand-by readiness, should they be needed to carry the mutants out of danger. His last action before his arrest is to order the launch of the ships. And yet the occupants are exposed to the dangers of a crash-landing, without even the benefit of safety harness. That is the careless bit.

Now comes the unlucky part, every writer's nightmare come true. Chapter Sixteen begins:

'Under its cloud layer, the surface temperature of Venus varied from 99 degrees Fahrenheit to 101 degrees Fahrenheit. The lower atmosphere was a mixture of ammonia and oxygen, heavily laden with water vapour. Among the oceans and rolling hills toiled a variety of life forms, building and evolving, planning and creating.'

On 18 October 1967, Russia's Venus-4 soft-landed on the surface of Venus. Our so-called 'Kister Earth' was shown to be a desert planet, with, possibly, terrestrial-like silicate rocks, an atmosphere of carbon dioxide and a surface temperature of about 530 degrees Fahrenheit, which would have boiled-off any oceans long ago. If life exists on Venus, then it can, on the evidence, be little more than primitive one-cell structures.

I sympathise with the writer. I had a similar experience, with a short story, years ago. Sputnik 2 (carrying Laika, the first space dog) played the key rôle and the blasted thing burned up in the atmosphere just as the story was due to go to the printers. I was saved on that occasion by the nimble-witted Peter Hamilton.

Having said all that, I must add, with the strongest emphasis, that the new scientific evidence about conditions on Venus in no way spoiled for me an excellent, enjoyable and craftsman-like book.

I've sketched in enough of the story to whet your appetites, so I'll say no more about that. Everything about the book is good: the plot is intricate, but clear; the ideas are imaginative and thoughtful, sometimes daring; real people react credibly to real situations; the writing is taut and skilled.

Read the book for yourselves and see how neatly the writer draws all the strands of the plot into a tight noose of exquisite irony.

There is a depth to Dick's novel that puts it among the best science fiction and it could become a minor classic.

Donald Malcolm

TWO DOZEN DRAGON EGGS

By Donald A. Wollheim

Powell Publications Inc., pp 181, 208 pages. 95 cents

Reviewed by John Foyster

'I wrote,' says Mr. Wollheim in his introduction, 'in spite of early efforts, really to suit myself, to get an idea into type, to put down a curious thought...' This note is repeated elsewhere in the various blurbs associated with the book. Even without this plain statement of intent we could have easily deduced just what Mr. Wollheim has been up to. After all, when twenty-four stories are crammed into one hundred and ninety-one pages it is only reasonable to expect that each story will be restricted in some ways.

The most important aspect of these stories is that one listed second by Mr. Wollheim: the stories have been written to 'get an idea into type'. To do this Mr. Wollheim can be said either to have ignored all facets of the short story apart from the initial inspiration, or to have stripped from his stories anything which gets between reader and writer. The view taken will depend upon the reader's feelings. Certainly the stories have punch, generally speaking, and some of them are thoroughly unpleasant, but it may well be that in some cases the brevity of the yarn causes it to have less impact than it might otherwise have had. For example, 'Extending The Holdings' is a story in which Mr. Wollheim has devoted quite a large fraction of his space to supplying background—and this is very well done. But because this background is interesting the reader cannot help but feel cheated when the story is cut off. Firstly, there is the resentment one often feels when an appealing character is killed off. Secondly, there is the suspicion that the story finished where it did only because the author had a relatively limited conception of what might have been. Thirdly, there is the suspicion that the impact might have been greater had the author devoted just a little more time to developing characters and situation. By contrast, 'Last Stand of a Space Grenadier' is nicely balanced.

As for 'putting down a curious thought'—well, there is no doubt that many of the ideas here are curious. But some of them are rather less than interesting. The contrast between best and worst is quite remarkable, but perhaps less so in view of the attitude Mr. Wollheim has made plain is his—that of the amateur writer of short stories who occasionally sells one to a magazine. This is not a condemnation of Mr. Wollheim's efforts so much as a suggestion as to why the book reads as it does. Most science fiction writers are interested in telling a story (most successful ones, anyway). They must also always have in mind that they are paid by the word. On the other hand a writer who does this sort of thing as a sideline, an amateur, will simply make his point and leave it at that. This can be either a good thing or a bad, and Mr. Wollheim's book has a little of each. Nevertheless the reader who likes to find bright ideas in his sf will find this collection hard to fault.

Despite the fact that Mr. Wollheim claims to have written the stories 'to suit himself', there is nothing particularly adventurous in their presentation. Indeed, of the twenty-four stories, sixteen are written in the first person. Even some of the others are scarcely more than anecdotes with frills.

This is not an outstanding collection, but it is a worthwhile one.

HAUSER'S MEMORY

By Curt Siodmak

Published by Herbert Jenkins at 22/6d. 184 pp.

Reviewed by Kathryn Buckley

Some of the most exciting discoveries in the past few years have been made in the field of molecular biology, particularly the discovery of the structure and proper-

ties of genes and the importance of desoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and ribonucleic acid (RNA) "DNA and RNA are part of the genetic mechanism that controls the hereditary trends in humans and animals. DNA is the genetic code, RNA is its prophet"... DNA contains the hereditary code of the species and determines why a mouse looks like a mouse and not like a flower or a bird... why a bird is able to build a nest without being taught—the instinctive memory... They (RNA) are not the primary genetic code... translations of the DNA messages... Some RNA are different. These carry not the static memory of the species but the dynamic memory of the individual. Man and other animals learn by experience, which is repetition, shock and imitation. Behaviour is based on DNA-coded capacity acting with the RNA-coded memory carried in brain cells."

Thus it would appear that RNA is one of the key substances in the learning process, which is largely a question of memory, so that one could construct the hypothesis that if RNA is transferred, memory also is transferred.

This is the scientific datum from which Curt Siodmak extrapolates HAUSER'S MEMORY. It does not require much ingenuity to exaggerate 'memory' in the animal sense of a lesson taught by experience, such as that fire burns and ice freezes, etc., into specific memory employed in the thinking process, which is inextricably bound up with our emotions or to use a metaphysical term 'soul'. At this point the author seems to have run out of ingenuity, for what he has written is another Jekyll and Hyde story.

Dr. Patrick Cory, a biochemist, carries out experiments on marine flatworms, training thousands to follow a light to find food. When their RNA was injected into untrained flatworms they moved at once towards the light in search of food. Similar experiments on hamsters produced trained rats, when injected with hamster RNA. Reference to a popular encyclopaedia indicates that such experiments have actually been carried out, though attempts at confirmation through repetition by other teams of scientists have proved more elusive.

These indications that memory is influenced and perhaps directed by certain chemicals stimulate a fascinating range of theoretical variations, as Cory says '... a monkey could be changed into a smart human being, a dog might be made to act like a cat. One could preserve the knowledge of highly trained older people by transferring it to younger brains. The more biochemistry found out that the human body reacted to chemicals, that thought and emotion could be induced by chemicals, that man was purely a chemical factory, the more the age-old concepts of man's soul and divine ordination had to be re-examined.'

One would have thought that there was plenty of material here for inventive extrapolation—both in accepted human terms for a philosophical and psychological exploration and in more bizarre terms for a less plausible extrapolation to serve as a skeleton for a fast-

paccd adventure story.

What we are given is the story of a scientist who is injected with the RNA of a murdered man, being taken over by the dead man and accepting responsibility for certain tasks he would have carried out. How this would in fact work out is a matter for conjecture, but in view of the complexities of human nature the final answer is unlikely to be entirely chemical so that a more subtle interplay of the two RNA's together with other factors (i.e. the memory of death) would be probable.

It has been said that some books should be tasted, some swallowed whole and others savoured. This one is to be swallowed whole—a quick snack to bridge the boredom gap between other more interesting activities.

The idea of one man being 'taken over' by another is far from new—though the means to achieve the end is rather more plausible than most—in Sunday newspaper terms a threat just around the corner. That the host mind should be a Jewish American good-boy scientist and the interloper a Nazi scientist bad-boy will seem far too predictable to all but a few readers.

The plot development from there on gives the reader a more than average chance of winning the game of 'What happens next?'. We follow our hero across half Europe on a journey of revenge and expiation, sprinkled with kidnappings, car rides, border bunglings, double-cross and counter double cross, with expendable henchmen expended en route, and the cold controlled scientist Dr. Cory never far away. Now and then I hoped for a little ingenuity, a little detective work for our heroes, but Hauser had always conveniently met a man who knew a man who told him where his prey had gone. This is particularly disappointing in the way Hauser tracks down Gusman, whose whereabouts and identity are carefully guarded, but Hauser had met a man who told him—etc.

The trouble is the book is too competently written and lacks inventive gusto. There are plenty of schools and courses to tell the writer with a little talent and lots of determination, how to write publishable fiction. In science fiction there is plenty of opportunity for what would otherwise be mediocre stories to be lifted by lively inventive imagination, as exemplified by the vast range of types of story, from the medieval romance to the philosophical treatise.

Unfortunately what often happens is that an author thinks one idea is enough, and tacks on the end, say, a spy-intrigue story. This can be valid if the idea is sufficiently intriguing, if the spy-intrigue story is exciting in its own right, or if the author is capable of handling his subject matter in an interesting manner.

Nowadays we have a diet of slick smooth excitement stories on television where the banality of the plot is concealed by visual elements. There are one or two incidents in HAUSER'S MEMORY which might have been written with filming in mind, such as the slicing of the brain and the final shooting.

But, perhaps because of this possible preoccupation with potential television and film sales, there is no subtlety of characterisation. If Hauser is going to take



over his host not only in his memory but in his emotions, dreams and character, then a greater attempt should have been made to make him come as alive for the reader as the author tells us he is to his host. The sexual element is handled in a rather coy fashion, instead of with sensitivity and perception qualities which can be conveyed more readily in our permissive society.

Despite all this, the book could have been saved by a lively and refreshing style. Instead the characters smile sardonically or thinly, rasp savagely—randomly selected phrases, which have little effect other than irritation on the reader.

In the midst of explicit and presumably scientifically accurate prose, phrases such as 'Slaughter's eyes nearly disappeared into the shadowy caverns of their sockets', 'The sarcasm in Cory's eyes dropped into his voice' appear utterly incongruous.

Cur Siodmak writes lucidly and well when dealing with scientific matters and this is a painless way of acquiring some facts about molecular biology which, so far as the layman can ascertain appear to be accurate, but when he strains for artistic effect the result is disastrous.

Kathryn Buckley



EDDIE JONES.

K.W.EATON TRANSFERENCE

Lewis' first thought was, why doesn't he frighten me? He was huge, a great awkward lumbering creature as big as a Canadian grizzly, and he could conceivably be violent; but somehow he looked so helpless, as though for all his size he would crumple at a blow.

'Good morning,' he said into his side of the translation machine, 'My name is Dr. Matthew Lewis.'

A string of involved clicks and grunts came out of the other side. The creature opposite him replied in a deep, powerful voice.

'Good morning,' translated the machine tinnily. 'I am Teremen. What do you wish to do, Dr. Lewis?'

Lewis looked across the desk, bare save for the squat, gleaming shape of the machine. The Shuran shifted restlessly in his seat, which creaked protestingly under the massive weight. He seemed awkward and ill-at-ease. Even the clothes he wore did not somehow look right or fit well on him. Lewis looked at the alien's face, and the brown eyes stared back at him, but he could read no meaning into the expression on the great furred jowl. This was going to be difficult.



'Just a talk, to start with,' he said. 'Tell me something about yourself.'

'What do you wish to know?'

With the delicate antennae of his professional instincts, Lewis could sense an air of hostility.

'Tell me about your work,' he said. 'You are a geologist, I believe.'

'Not exactly,' said the Shuran, and started on a complicated description of his work. It was not easy to follow but Lewis had done his homework and could understand enough to keep up his end of the conversation. After a while Teremen began to lose some of his initial awkwardness and talk more freely. Lewis let him go on for about half-an-hour, occasionally putting in a remark himself, before he ended the interview.

The huge alien had barely lumbered from the room when the wall on Lewis' left shimmered and became transparent.

'Was that satisfactory?' said a precise voice through a loudspeaker somewhere in front of him. He looked through the glass and saw, dimly, the elegant seated figure of the Capellan, the cold, cat-like eyes fixed on him.

'Yes, not bad,' he said. 'It did no more than break the ice of course. Tomorrow we will start properly.'

'You can perform your . . . analysis, then?'

'Well, it seems possible, at least. But the translation machine makes it very difficult. You lose all the subtleties of tone and expression. And it's very difficult for a non-Shuran to read facial expressions. Quite frankly, I don't think that a human is in the best position for this job.'

'My dear Dr. Lewis, we have already discussed that.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' he said to the Capellan. 'Anyway, we shall see tomorrow.'

The Capellan took the hint and the wall became opaque again. Lewis got up and made his way back to his 'quarters', the little artificial area of earth-environment the Capellans had so painstakingly created for him, rather, thought Lewis, as a zoo will provide a penguin with some rocks and a pool of water, to convince it that it is still in its home environment.

But Lewis was a long way from home; light years away, and all the carefully English meals, the carefully English furniture, the carefully English books, films and music that were available to fill his spare time could not disguise it. For the hundredth time he wondered why, of all the psychiatrists in the hundreds of planets in the Federation, he had been selected. Oh, the Capellan had explained it all very clearly, very carefully. Different planets develop different sides to their cultures at different speeds. And psychiatry was one science that Earth had developed and the Federation, so much more advanced in other fields, had neglected. Now, suddenly, it was needed. Something was wrong with the Shurans, the oldest and wisest race in the Federation and, after thirty years of scarcely seeming to notice Earth, the Capellans (who seemed to control almost everything in the Federation) had come to Earth and plucked him, Dr. Matthew Lewis, from his comfortable London consulting-room.

The door opened and one of the silent, ubiquitous little Dirans came in with his evening meal. He had come to like them. They, his patient and the Capellan were the only creatures he had seen since he had arrived—where?—he didn't even know what planet he was on—a week ago. The Diran put the tray down, gave a curious little bow and left. What, wondered Lewis, as he sat down to his solitary meal,

really was wrong with the Shurans? A neurosis that seemed to infect an entire race—very strange, he thought, as he bit into an apparently genuine lamb chop, very strange indeed.

Over the next week the interviews proceeded steadily and Lewis gradually began to piece together a picture of Teremen's personality. But it was a slow and difficult task. His usual technique was to encourage the subject to talk as much as possible about himself, only occasionally inserting a question or guiding the conversation in a direction he thought was helpful. Teremen, however, would only talk freely on relatively neutral subjects and Lewis was forced to ask more direct questions and at times almost to prise information from him. And there was an underlying edginess and hostility about his patient that he could neither dispel nor pin down, try as he might.

At the end of the seventh day's analysis, he was summoned by the Capellan. He went to the interview room and sat down. As soon as he had done so, the wall shimmered and the Capellan appeared.

'How are things proceeding, Dr. Lewis?'

Lewis took a deep breath. 'I don't think I can proceed any further.'

'You have the solution?'

'No. Frankly, I think my techniques are of no use here.'

'You have discovered nothing then? Surely you have found out certain things about Teremen's mind?'

'Yes, but what? All right, I do now know one or two things about him. Firstly, his father was a very distinguished person among the Shurans. Although Teremen himself is by no means a failure, he resents this, even though he will not admit it to himself.'

'Secondly, he was frightened by an insect when he was very small. He appears to have forgotten this but it is still there in his subconscious mind and was brought out by hypnosis.'

'But what does it all add up to? I can only work on human psychology, and by human standards he is perfectly normal. He has the minor problems and worries that everyone does, but nothing that could possibly cause a serious mental disturbance. And in any case, these are all very individual things. They are related to his own character and personal history. You couldn't possibly imagine a whole planet suffering from the same identical things.'

'The only thing that puzzled me was his hostility. It is quite common for a patient to transfer the aggression he feels towards someone or something to his analyst, but he seemed to be hostile right from the start, which was odd, and I can't for the life of me see who or what the real object of his aggression is.'

'There is something he is hiding?'

'Nothing that I can see . . . Well, there was one thing. At one point in the interviews he seemed . . . evasive somehow.'

'What were you discussing?'

'Ancient history. Shuran history, that is. He didn't seem to like that somehow. It puzzled me at the time but I didn't think it was important so I didn't press the point.'

The Capellan examined a long, elegant, six-fingered hand thoughtfully. 'Perhaps you should,' he said.

Lewis sighed. 'All right,' he said, 'but I think we're clutching at straws.'

'We shall see,' said the Capellan, blandly and suddenly the screen was dark again.

'I want to talk about history, Teremen.'

'History,' said the machine tonelessly.

'Yes, Shuran history. Tell me about it.'

'It is a very long history, and I am not a historian. I do not quite see—'

'I am not so much interested in the facts as your attitude to them. You learnt history at school?'

'Yes.'

'How much can you remember now?'

Teremen began to recount what he had learnt as a child, slowly and rather reluctantly.

'I do not see what all this will do,' he said after a while.

'We shall see,' said Lewis. 'Tell me about the earliest history of your people, going back to the time before you had spaceflight. You learnt that very early, you say.'

'Yes I remember my old teacher, Calebis.' There was a silence.

'Yes?' said Lewis enquiringly.

'I hated him,' said the Shuran suddenly. There was another long silence, broken only by the soft ticking coming from the machine. Teremen sat very still, staring straight in front of him. Lewis waited, patiently...

'He used to go on about our traditions. On and on and on... About how we had so much to live up to. It's not fair! I'm not perfect, no one is.'

'You find these standards hard to live up to?'

'Well, how would you like it? To feel the eyes of the whole galaxy were on you. It's impossible, I tell you.'

'You feel guilty about it.'

The Shuran's voice grew louder and harsher, although the machine continued to translate everything in the same flat, emotionless tone.

'What do you know about it, alien? Go back to your primitive little planet. I refuse to see you any more.' And he stood up, looming alarmingly over Lewis for a moment, and walked from the room, bumping clumsily against the desk as he did so. Lewis let him go, and sat for some minutes staring at the machine in front of him before he too got up and left.

'Remarkable,' said the Capellan. 'Quite remarkable.' He was leaning back in his chair, the tips of his long spidery fingers together, the big cat-eyes looking at Lewis through the glass, making him feel like a mouse. He had had a nightmare about those eyes one night. It was late, about ten o'clock in the evening, and they had both had time to consider the Shuran's outburst.

'Of course, it is so obvious now,' the Capellan went on. 'The whole Federation looks up to the Shurans. So much so that we have almost made them into saints. And now the entire race has got themselves into this—what do you call it—neurosis, trying to live up to the standards we set them. Remarkable,' he said for the fourth time.

'He's lying,' said Lewis.

'I beg your pardon?' said the Capellan sharply.

'I said he's lying.'

'But he is submitting to this voluntarily. I do not understand why he should lie.'

'Well you'll just have to take my word for it,' said Lewis edgily. The strain of the past few weeks was beginning to tell on him. 'It does seem surprising, I admit,' he went on in a calmer voice, 'but I have had the same thing with human patients. A part of his mind is trying to hide the truth and it has created, or exaggerated, something to do so. I'm sure he believes in it himself. But it's not the truth. It's too—oh too pat, too tidy, too plausible. Real truths are always confused and messy and take a long time to drag

out and untangle.'

'And what is the real truth?'

'I don't know. But I think I might be able to find out now.'

The Capellan was still for a long time, tapping one long finger slowly on the polished table in front of him.

'I am... impressed,' he said. 'Your craft is clearly not a simple one. And clearly you are very good at it.'

'Thank you,' said Lewis. 'Tomorrow I—' but suddenly the screen was dark again.

Next morning he was in the interview room early, waiting for the Shuran. About half-past nine Teremen came in in his awkward shambling way, and sat down. He made a guttural sound which by now Lewis recognised before the machine said 'Good morning' at him.

'Good morning, Teremen,' he said. 'I have been thinking about what you said yesterday and I would like to go back over it. I think some of it may have been a little mistaken.'

The great shape leaned suddenly forward across the table at Lewis. He suppressed an urge to shrink away.

'I am not a liar, doctor from another world.'

'I'm sure you're not, consciously. But there is a part of your mind that knows the truth and is trying very hard to suppress it. That part has persuaded you that all your problems are due to certain things in the past, the things you told me about yesterday. But I'm afraid it just won't do. Oh, I've no doubt that everything you told me yesterday is true, but it still won't do. It's still not what is really bothering you. That's still in there, and we must dig a bit deeper to find it.'

'Rubbish.'

'All right, let's find out if it's rubbish. Let's talk about history again. Going back to the time before you had space travel. I've been doing a little research of my own on this. It was a very interesting period. You had a planet-wide government that was actually the basis for the Federation later on. Quite an achievement. As a Shuran you should feel proud of it.' He stopped, and waited.

'Do you?' he said.

'Not particularly,' said Teremen after a while.

'Why not?'

'Why should I?'

'Don't the Shurans deserve any credit for it?'

Silence.

'Why not?' he went on (it was against all his principles to badger a patient thus, but nothing else seemed to work with Teremen). 'Is it because of something else? Something they did in the past?'

'It's a lie,' said Teremen.

'What's a lie, Teremen?'

'All of it. It's all lies.'

'You mean your history?'

'Yes.'

'But how can it be? It's all documented.'

'No.'

'But it is, Teremen.'

'It's a lie,' repeated Teremen stubbornly.

'Not all of it, surely?'

There was a long pause.

'No,' said Teremen eventually.

'But some of it?'

'Yes.'

'What parts, Teremen?'

'Shan't tell you,' said Teremen childishly.

'Well all right then,' said Lewis after a while. 'I shall have to work it out for myself. Obviously there is something in the past that you are ashamed of. You know about it, probably only half-consciously, it's a race-memory of some sort. It must have been handed down over thousands of years, never spoken about but half-buried in all your memories. Am I right?'

There was a sullen silence on the other side of the table. 'The question is, what is this guilty secret? Obviously something in the remote past, something you did to your own people, as you were the only intelligent species on the planet, so the records—'

A cold feeling came over Lewis.
'Teremen, you were the only race on that planet?'
'Go away.'
'Teremen, you said the records were untrue.'
'Go away. Leave me alone.'
'Was there another race on your planet?'

Silence.
'Was there?'
'Yes! Yes, yes, yes!' A great arm crashed down on the table, making the machine jump. Lewis forced himself not to shrink back.

'What happened to them?' he said. He had a horrible, sick idea what the answer would be.

'We killed them all.'
'Oh God,' thought Lewis, 'what do I do now?' He put his hands palm down on the cool surface of the table to stop them trembling. When he could trust his voice, he said: 'Tell me about it.'

'We learnt everything from them. Then we killed them all and said it was all ours. We destroyed all trace of them and rewrote the history books. We are the oldest civilisation in the galaxy so no one ever knew. The others all think we were alone on our planet.'

'But how do you know all this?'
'I just do.'
'But someone must have told you at some time. Have you ever discussed it with any other Shurans?'

'No.'
'Then how do you know it is true?'
'I know.'
'But how?'
'I know,' repeated the Shuran stubbornly, and Lewis believed him. Somehow the memory, or a dim fragment of it, must have been inherited.

'Do you know what they look like?' he said.
'No.'
'But haven't you any picture of them in your mind?'
'I don't know.' The Shuran had lapsed into a sullen brooding awkwardness. Lewis had an idea.

'Wait here a minute,' he said, and hurrying from the room he made his way to his 'quarters', returning a few minutes later with a sketch-pad and pencil.

'Could you try and draw one?' he said.
'Perhaps,' said the Shuran cautiously. He picked up the pad in his big, clumsy-looking hand and began to sketch, hesitating at first and then with increasing confidence. Lewis watched him gradually becoming more and more absorbed in his task. He glanced at the drawing for a moment out of curiosity and suddenly went ice-cold.

Teremen was drawing a man.
'Teremen,' he said carefully, 'I think you have made a mistake.' The alien had stopped and was staring, puzzled, at what he had drawn.

'Look Teremen, you've got it wrong, you're confused.'
The Shuran looked up and stared at Lewis.
'You,' he said. 'It's you.'
'No, Teremen, you've got it wrong, you're confused.'
'It's you, you, you're one of them! Go away! Leave me alone!' The Shuran came round the desk, the big black eyes staring at Lewis, bellowing in his own incomprehensible language, the machine still tonelessly translating.

Lewis jumped up and backed away. He knew his control of the interview had gone. As he did so his heel caught on the leg of the chair and he fell backwards awkwardly. For one terrifying moment the giant figure of the Shuran loomed over him. Then the door opened and three green-tinted Dirans rushed in and seized Teremen. The great creature struggled furiously for a while, but he was helpless against the sinewy little Dirans. Suddenly his arms fell to his side and he allowed himself to be led quietly away.

'I hope,' said the Capellan, that you are feeling better.'
'Yes, thank you,' said Lewis coldly. It was some hours later and he was sitting in the interview room, once again facing the Capellan.

'Perhaps I had better explain things more fully.'
'Perhaps you had.'
'Very well then. Let me show you a Tellara.'
He pressed a button on his desk and a picture appeared on a large panel at the back of the room.

'It is a remarkable resemblance, is it not?'
Lewis had to admit that it was. On close examination the creature on the slide was clearly not human, but the similarities were striking. Only the bulkiness of the figure and some subtle differences in the face gave it away.

'So they did exist. I was never sure that Teremen was not making it all up.'

'Oh yes, they existed all right. They were what Teremen said they were, an older race that acted as guides and mentors to the Shurans. And the Shurans did really kill them, but it was an accident and not, as Teremen imagines, some awful massacre. It was a Shuran doctor, doing research on an unknown virus. He was careless and some of it escaped. To the Shurans it was relatively harmless, but to the more delicate Tellara it was deadly. In a few years the entire race was wiped out.'

'It must have shattered the Shurans,' said Lewis
'Yes, the Tellara thought that. That's why they made their mistake.'

'Mistake?'
'Oh, an entirely excusable one. And a very noble gesture. But—a mistake. You see, they are responsible for wiping themselves from the pages of history. Every city, every building, record, work of art, they destroyed. Most meticulously. So much so that it was incredibly difficult to find any proof of their existence at all, even when we suspected it. We might never have been sure but for finding the remains of an old Tellaran rocket in deep space; an early attempt at spaceflight that had gone wrong. It must have been drifting there for millenia and at first we had no idea where it had come from, but eventually we worked it out.'

Lewis shifted restlessly on his chair.
'But I still don't see why—'

'Why they did it? To stop the Shurans feeling guilty. They told them never to mention the Tellara, destroy any remaining evidence of their existence, rewrite the history books, even fake historical evidence. Oh, those Shurans alive at the time would know it was a lie, but in three or

four generations it would be accepted and the Shurans would go on developing their civilisation. Better a growing, living civilisation as a memorial than a few stones and books and a race crippled with guilt. So the Tellara thought.'

'But they were wrong.'

'Partly wrong, yes. The memory lived on, as a race-memory; some sort of collective guilty secret, very deeply buried. But it festers, and with time gets worse. The rest of us tried to stop it, but we could do nothing. The mental blocks in the Shuran's minds were so deep-rooted that all our techniques were useless. But we had pictures of the Tellara, from the spaceship. We showed them to a Shuran patient and seemed to get some reaction. We were sure that there was a memory buried there somewhere, but it was not enough. Then we realised the extraordinary resemblance between humanity and the Tellara. A patient will often transfer his emotions about someone or something to the analyst, but if he could actually be analysed by his own private nightmare—'

'The transference could be strong enough to break the mental blocks,' interrupted Lewis. 'Yes, even I had worked that out. So it was all a pack of lies, all that stuff about human psychology being so advanced.'

'It was necessary,' said the Capellan blandly. 'Had you known the truth it would have affected your work.'

'I don't see the use of it all, anyway,' said Lewis sullenly. 'Surely you can't analyse the whole race?'

'If necessary.'

'I don't see that it was worth it.'

'You don't see that it was worth it?'

'No,' said Lewis stubbornly.

'All right then, let me try and explain.'

Without warning he stood up and in two long strides he was close to the glass. Lewis jumped up from his chair and backed away in sudden irrational fear. He had never seen the Capellan properly before, only seated at the desk with his long robes hiding most of his body. He was much taller than Lewis had realised, about eight feet, with massive legs and great ugly splayed toes. He raised one hand and suddenly long curved talons slid from the finger-ends. He reached out his arm and lazily drew the claws down the glass, leaving six deep score-marks. For one hideous moment Lewis thought he was going to smash the glass and come through into his half of the room.

'They are redundant now, of course,' said the Capellan.

'What?' said Lewis vaguely.

'The claws.' He held them up for Lewis' inspection. 'They are redundant now, we no longer use them. Like your appendix.'

'Yes?' said Lewis. He was confused and frightened.

'My ancestors,' went on the Capellan, 'were a kind of hunting lizard, a little like the creature that used to exist on your planet long ago, tyrannosaurus rex. I believe it was called. We used to hunt little creatures like you.'

'All right,' said Lewis, who had recovered a little from his fright, 'you wanted to scare me. I'm scared. Why didn't you just switch the lights off and shout "boo"! Of all the silly childish tricks.'

'I was merely trying to prove something.'

'What?'

'That I am a carnivorous lizard. Oh, I don't use the claws: We haven't for thousands of years. But I still have them. Now isn't that curious?'

'I don't know what on earth you are talking about,' said

Lewis, turning away irritably.

The Capellan's voice rose savagely.

'I am talking about evolution, little creature, evolution. We came from the jungle, we Capellans, seventy thousand years ago. That's just a blink of time's eye, seventy thousand years. You don't get rid of teeth and claws in that time, and you don't get rid of what goes with them. We haven't, and neither have you.'

'What do you mean?' said Lewis, staring at the Capellan, who was still standing close to the glass.

'I mean what I say. I am a carnivorous lizard. You are a hunting ape. An ape in trousers.'

'Look—' Lewis made an instinctive, angry move towards the glass. The Capellan laughed, a harsh, ugly sound.

'It's no good, little caveman. You don't have your stone axe. Besides, I have claws. You see, the shell is very thin. A few harsh words and you are ready for violence.'

'All right, all right, I get the point,' said Lewis angrily. 'Civilisation is a thin shell and easily broken. So what?'

'You don't get the point at all. The point is that we are not civilised, either of us. Oh, I know you have your little toys, your rockets, your computers. We have those things too, much better ones: interstellar rockets, micro-computers. Oh, you'd be amazed at the toys we've got.' His voice rang out harshly.

'And we are still savages. And so are you.'

'But Teremen is not. Think, Doctor Lewis, think about this. Eleven thousand years ago, a Shuran made a mistake; I repeat, a mistake. As a result, half a planet died. But it was an accident. One person's mistake. Three hundred years ago we, the Capellans, had a war. We wiped out three planets, three whole planets; turned them to radioactive glass. As for you, I could not begin to list the things humanity has done. Your planet swims in blood. I wonder you don't drown in it.'

'Now then my good doctor, here is the point. Do you care? No, you don't. Neither do I.'

'But Teremen cares. One Shuran, thousands of years ago, made a mistake. And Teremen cares. He cares so much he's ill. That is why he must rule the Galaxy, and not you or I. Not because he is a better maker of toys, or even more intelligent. But because he is civilised and you and I are not.'

There was a long, awkward silence. The Capellan turned round and stepped back to his desk.

'I'm not so sure I like being a barbarian,' said Lewis after a while. The Capellan spun round.

'Do you think I like it?' he said savagely. 'However,' he went on, trying to regain his composure, 'I don't think we are serving any purpose by discussing this further. Your transport is awaiting you, so I suggest you return to your home planet, and I will return to mine. Oh, by the way, before you go, that is a small personal gift to compensate you for all the inconvenience you have suffered.'

He gestured towards a small, shiny object on a table in the right-hand corner of Lewis' half of the room. Lewis picked it up and examined it curiously.

'What is it?'

'One of our toys,' said the Capellan. 'Beads and trinkets, let us say, from one savage to another.'

Lewis hurled the thing at the wall, where it shattered into a thousand delicate fragments.

'You can go to hell,' he said, as he walked from the room. The Capellan's bitter laughter followed him down the corridor.

FIXED IMAGE

PHILIP E. HIGH



“ It was then that the room seemed to up-end oddly. He had a brief impression of a curious red mist and then his vision was horizontal and lower—”

‘He thinks,’ said M’Guire in a neutral voice, ‘that he is a dog.’ He paused, as if for emphasis. ‘An alsatian dog. Sometimes it is a cat or a lion but usually a dog.’

Sarranac looked at him sideways. He’d been dragged half way round the world and missed an important conference for this?

He said, a little testily: ‘This is not an unusual hallucination, Mr. M’Guire.’

‘Ah!’ M’Guire made the exclamation sound mysterious. ‘I’m afraid there are rather unusual side-effects. But for this, naturally, I should not have had the temerity to ask your help.’

He led the way down one of the Institution’s long corridors. ‘Bowls, that’s the patient’s name, experimented in “trips”. It’s the usual drug addict story, a weird mixture of pills taken for additional kicks. The combination he stumbled upon has proved disturbing to say the least—ah, here we are.’ He paused with his finger on the admission stud. ‘He’s dying, unfortunately, a toxic element somewhere in the mixture. He has, perhaps, two months—’

It was a normal restraint cell behind the thick door, skilfully decorated to resemble a normal bedroom. A male nurse, clearly chosen for his bulging shoulders, sat on a low chair beside the bed. He rose as they entered and M’Guire became professional.

‘Any changes in the patient’s condition?’

The man’s forehead wrinkled. ‘We had to put wire-netting across the windows, sir. The air-conditioning failed and, on a hot day like this, it was open the windows or half suffocate.’

‘Wire-netting?’ It was clear to Sarranac that M’Guire was searching desperately in his mind for an explanation. ‘Wire-netting!’

The man half raised his arms, then dropped them to his sides in an oddly helpless way. ‘He had a new idea, sir, he thought he was a seagull.’

‘Oh—ah!’ M’Guire sounded as if he understood. ‘Very well, Palmer. Wait outside the door, please.’

Sarranac waited until he had gone before he said, with pointed irritation: ‘Are you quite sure that was not the patient, Mr. M’Guire?’ He looked at the wire. ‘Catering to the patient’s delusions? Kilvenski tried that technique fifteen years ago with only limited success.’

‘I am familiar with existing techniques, thank you,’ said M’Guire stiffly.

Sarranac warmed to him, he liked men who stood on their own feet and refused to be awed by his reputation.

‘I’m sorry, that was uncalled for, but it has been a long tiring day.’

M’Guire smiled briefly but both were aware of a lessening of tension. ‘I’m sorry, too. This case worries me.’ He leaned over the bed. ‘Hello, Jim, how are you feeling today?’ He did not wait for an answer. ‘I have brought an expert along to look at you—this is Professor Sarranac who is most interested in your case.’

‘When do I get a shot?’ The man on the bed did not even glance in Sarranac’s direction.

‘You will get your shot at the proper time, Jim.’

‘Half a grain! It doesn’t even lift me out of the dark.’

It was clear to Sarranac that M’Guire was fighting a frown, but he said, smoothly: ‘I know how hard it is but you must understand that this tailing-off process is part of your cure.’

‘Who the hell wants to be cured?’

‘I will ignore that remark. I do understand, however, what you are going through and I am prepared to make the process less painful—if you co-operate.’

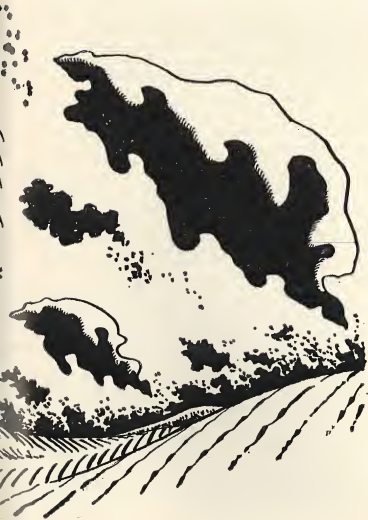
‘What’cha want this time?’ The young-old face on the pillow glowered upwards in calculating malevolence.

‘Just a demonstration of your—ah—symptoms.’

‘Bigger shot first?’

‘Very well.’ Aside, he said: ‘I have an uncomfortable feeling this is unethical but only the increased dosage will persuade him. Incidentally, for what it’s worth, he’s wearing a restraint suit.’

He dabbed the patient’s emaciated arm with a swab. ‘You will be feeling better in no time. Don’t forget you



agreed to co-operate.'

'Oh sure, sure.'

'Excellent—er—not the alsatian dog if you don't mind. I am sure Professor Sarranac is familiar with alsatian dogs, he has one of his own, I understand—how about a nice pussy cat?'

The patient spat—literally. 'What you think I am—some kid?' He swore obscenely and was suddenly calm again. 'Let me think.' The forehead corrugated painfully, then: 'A lamb? Or do lambs scare you as well?'

'A lamb would be very nice indeed,' said M'Guire, refusing to take the bait.

'Right, then.' The patient closed his eyes. 'A stupid little white lamb what has gone and lost—its—' The voice trailed away.

Sarranac opened his mouth to comment quickly but remained silent.

Something was happening to the patient's face, it had become blurred and uncertain in outline. Sarranac blinked, trying to focus his eyes. It was like seeing the face of a swimmer below swiftly running water—water which became deeper and darker and swifter—

The bed clothes heaved and there, standing half on the pillow and half on the coverlet was a white thing which bleated piteously and took nervous steps on wobbly uncertain legs . . .

Later, in the quiet of M'Guire's office, Sarranac lit a thin cheroot with surprisingly steady hands. 'I owe you an apology, I had no idea—any theories?'

'Several, I am not sure any of them will stand up.'

'Suppose we examine them together,' suggested Sarranac gently. Both were aware now of co-operation and friendship.

'Right. I think the most likely explanation is that Bowls projects. Whatever those drugs did to him, they made him capable of involving others, clearly on an hypnotic level, in his own hallucinations.'

He took a pipe from his desk rack and began to fill it slowly. 'You were right, of course, I was catering to the patient's delusions. In order to convince us, he must first convince himself. But for the wire-netting, through which, he knows, a seagull could not pass, he might have done himself serious injury. We are three stories up. At the same time, the attendant, at least visually convinced he was dealing with a bird, might have clutched at the empty air for too long and been unable to save him.'

He paused and lit the pipe carefully. 'You see the dangers, I am sure, and our reasons for keeping him in a restraint suit. While we are trying to net an alsatian dog, he could get out of the bed and walk out.'

Sarranac took a small book from an inner pocket. 'I trust you have no objection to me taking notes? It helps me to get things down in black and white.'

'None whatever.' M'Guire made a faint plopping noise with his pipe. 'You know, every five minutes since this business cropped up, I've offered up a prayer of thanks that Bowls is what he is—stupid. I thank heaven that he is so lacking in imagination that he limits his powers to something as mundane as an ill-tempered dog. A patient with intelligence and imagination would have been out of here inside an hour and reduced the entire city to chaos. He could walk into a bank, project the illusion that he was not there. He could commit murder, rape, arson, and get away with it. He could even have these crimes pinned on his

worst enemies by assuming their appearances when he committed them.'

Sarranac looked up from his note book. 'Mr. M'Guire, don't think what I am about to say is facetious, or irrelevant. I come from a very old country where some of the old myths are still half-believed. In your case, I should get in a stock of silver bullets.'

M'Guire removed the pipe from his mouth and blinked. 'Eh? Oh, get the connection, they could only kill a werewolf with a silver bullet. Do you think, in the past, there were people who had the same sort of hypnotic force?'

'It is possible.' Sarranac smiled faintly. 'To be frank, however, I have a devious mind and was leading up to another subject. Suppose your silent prayer is unheard, suppose another patient appears with the same powers in another city in another part of the world. Assume, for one moment, that this patient is well endowed with intelligence and imagination.'

M'Guire shifted uneasily in his chair. 'It's one chance in a hundred million that some fool addict will stumble across the same drug combination.'

'Nonetheless it could happen.'

'Well, yes, remotely—what are you leading up to?'

'The obvious. We have to find out all we can now. I will be frank. While remaining compassionate to the very limits of our natures, we cannot afford, for the safety of the race, too many reserves.'

'What do you suggest?'

'Well, first, I think, we must establish what drugs he took and in what order. I know a highly skilled expert in Oslo upon whose discretion I can rely completely. I am convinced, knowing his reputation, that he could delete the toxic element completely.'

M'Guire scowled: 'Trouble is, he can't remember.'

'He'd remember under *Caluhil*.'

'In his condition, it would be very dangerous. Can we afford to take that chance?'

'Can we afford not to? You tell me the man is going to die.'

M'Guire frowned, removed his pipe from his mouth but did not speak.

Sarranac glanced at his note book. 'Next on the list is a series of tests with instruments, and preferably, something included which defeats him. I have yet to hear of anyone hypnotising a machine. If we had him nicely wired up, he might convince us he has turned into a dog and walked out, but not a bank of instruments.'

'You're not going to let him walk out!'

'Oh, but I am, Mr. M'Guire, and that is what is going to defeat him—'

Bowls glowered up from the bed. 'What the hell's this lot?'

'Routine tests,' said M'Guire smoothly. 'Nothing to be alarmed about at all. I just attach this electrode to your wrist—this one I am going to tape to your chest above your heart. It will only measure your heart-beat, blood pressure and so on.'

He paused and managed a convincing smile. 'We've been discussing your case, Jim, discussing it in detail. Professor Sarranac is of the opinion that I am being a little too harsh in this tailing off process.'

'Another shot, maybe?' The sunken eyes brightened hopefully.

'Not exactly. We had in mind a large shot, gradually reducing, then another not quite so large.' He paused. 'On

the other hand we should expect you to work for it. Your demonstration greatly impressed Professor Sarranac and he would like to see another. That is a second reason for all these wires and dials. We would like to see what happens when you do it.

'When do I get this big shot?'

'Ah, now, that is the point. On the table in the next room is a hypodermic all ready for you. All you have to do is go and help yourself.'

Bowls looked up at him suspiciously. 'You going to open the door for once?'

'No, Jim, we're not. On the other hand, as you will notice, workmen have cut a small hole in the left hand wall.'

Bowls raised himself on his elbow, looked, then guffawed bitterly. 'I thought there'd be a catch! You expect me to get through that?'

'Ah, Jim, that's where your talents come in. You couldn't but think what could. A dog, a lamb, a bird, a cat, a sn—'

M'Guire stopped, sweating slightly, he had nearly included 'snake' in his list but had bitten the word back just in time.

Fortunately Bowls had not noticed the slip.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Hadn't thought of that—there *is* a hypo in the next room isn't there?'

'On my word.' He rubbed his hands together briskly but nervously. 'Well, the experts are all set. When you're ready, old chap...'

'I know it's absurd,' M'Guire was puffing at his pipe furiously. 'But I still don't believe it. I saw it, you saw it, but it seems like a dream.'

Sarranac, outwardly calm, said: 'We cannot evade the facts no matter how much we wish to do so. The electrodes fell off, we saw the fox terrier dog walk through that hole.'

M'Guire nodded. One half of his mind seemed anxious to reject the facts while the other half screamed for an explanation. On examination, the restraint-suit was found to be empty, electrodes and wires lay on, or within, the bed. They had found Bowls in the next room, triumphant and glassy eyed. 'I did it, see? I did it, didn't think I could, eh? I've shown yer.'

The hypodermic had been lying on the floor, empty.

It *couldn't* happen. It *had* happened. He'd *seen* it.

He said: 'Any theories?'

Sarranac shook his aging head slowly. 'You're joking, of course.' He produced his wallet and extracted a piece of paper. 'I had this from Svensen—I sent him the complete list after we shot Bowls full of *Caluhil*.'

M'Guire shrugged. 'No use me looking at it, chemistry is out of my field.'

'And mine. He has, however, itemised the various drugs in order and under their popular names. More important, however, he has deleted the toxic element, in this case, alcohol. Had Bowls confined himself to drugs, his chance of recovery—subject of course to his addiction—would be certain.'

M'Guire took the list and looked at it. 'Fat lot of good that is now.'

'True, very true,' Sarranac sighed. 'To be frank, M'Guire, my conscience has been uneasy throughout this entire business. Neither you nor I could bend our principles sufficiently to ask for a volunteer to test that combination of drugs now.'

M'Guire's teeth clamped hard on the stem of his pipe.

'I couldn't agree more. In any case—*dare we?*'

'No, we dare not.' Sarranac sighed again. 'The only thing I can suggest at the moment is that we sleep on it. Perhaps we shall have some sort of inspiration, although I doubt it.'

'I'm pushing sixty-five.' After a sleepless night, M'Guire's eyes were bloodshot.

'I am seventy-two,' said Sarranac, severely.

'That's different, you're world-renowned. You will still be needed ten years from now. For myself, in eight months the Institute will retire me forcibly. I have nothing but my work and I dread retirement.'

'One becomes adjusted.'

'Some become adjusted. Look, in strict confidence, I married a woman twenty years my junior—don't tell me it was foolish *now*—the marriage didn't work. She drinks and "entertains"; I live here in the Institution. I haven't been home in fifteen years. You must agree, I am the obvious solution.'

'I will agree to nothing of the sort. I like you, M'Guire, but apart from my personal considerations, the danger is extreme.'

'Someone *has* to find out.'

'Don't be heroic, man.'

'I'm not, I'm scared sick. On the other hand, I shall never rest until I do something about it.'

M'Guire looked at the pills in his hand and shivered slightly. Now that it had actually come to it, the necessity of arriving at the truth seemed an unnecessary act of bravado. Even the safety of the race and the protection of mankind as a whole seemed a trivial matter—who the hell *cared?*

Sarranac's last words were still vivid in his mind. 'I can do nothing to stop you, of course, but in my considered opinion, you are taking an appalling risk. You are a brave but very foolish man.' There had been genuine anguish in the old tired eyes, anguish, respect and affection.

Sarranac, despite his outward calm, had gone to Vienna for two days. M'Guire knew why, the old man just couldn't be around when a respected colleague played ducks and drakes with his own life.

M'Guire tried the door again to make sure it was locked and switched the recorder on with his foot.

This was *it!*

Later he said, for the benefit of the recorder: '*Sixteen hundred hours. Have just taken last pill.*

'Sixteen plus five: Pulse rate increasing but not incompatibly with emotional state.

'Sixteen plus ten: Pulse rate above normal, palpitations, sweating profusely.

'Sixteen plus fifteen—I think; Breathless, vision blurred, concentration deteriorating, feel sick.

'Sixteen—something—or—other—Oh, God!—feel so ill—room rolling—like—a ship. Waves breaking—birds singing—in the coral reefs—turn off that—blasted saw—gongs—'

He regained consciousness briefly at twenty-three plus six but was too ill to record.

Just after two in the morning, he awoke again, vomited twice and fell into a natural if disturbed sleep.

It was ten in the morning when he awoke fully. He groaned, his mouth felt as if he had been drinking metal polish and he ached from head to toe.

He tottered across the room, poured three cups of cold

coffee down his throat and flopped back on the bed.

Slowly, apart from someone beating at the inside of his head with a hammer, he seemed to return to normal. He showered, removed the night's stubble from his face and scowled ill-temperedly at the floor. He had the uncomfortable feeling that it had all been a waste of time. No matter what he thought or how he thought it, he would remain an elderly man in a bathrobe. Maybe Bowls' metabolism was different, maybe—

Outside the window, men were repairing the street, going out of their way, it seemed to him, to make as much noise as possible. Who the devil could think with all that row going on?

Let's see, what did he want to be—M'Guire you must be mad—got to try it all the same. How about a tiger? He felt ill-tempered enough to tear someone to pieces.

Damn that noise!

A tiger would be damn useful now, leaping down on those stupid clattering morons—

It was then that the room seemed to up-end oddly. He had a brief impression of a curious red mist and then his vision was horizontal and lower.

Snarling, M'Guire slunk towards the window, teeth bared, ears back, tail twitching angrily.

Overwhelming terror rose inside him. *Get me back! I'm a man! I'm M'Guire!*

He sat naked on the cold floor and shivered. Some two feet away, the bathrobe, rent into three pieces, lay in an untidy heap.

He looked at his hands and naked legs. He *seemed* all right.

Shakily he rose and drank another cup of cold coffee. The transition back had seemed much the same except that his stay in the redness had seemed longer. He had had the strange impression that he had been somewhere. There had been an impression of red twilight, of barren rolling land and sullen streaming clouds.

'So you did it.' The cheroot between Sarranac's fingers was as steady as ever but his eyes were relieved. 'I take it you can now do it at will?'

'Yes, I did it.' M'Guire's voice was a little hoarse. 'I did it three times, and can now do it at will. But I wouldn't care to.'

Sarranac exhaled blue smoke. 'Perhaps you would care to explain that?'

'Certainly, if you permit me to tell it in my own way. I'll tie up the loose ends later. I'm afraid it's a long and rather tedious story.'

'Not for me,' said Sarranac firmly.

McGuire lit his pipe. 'Perhaps most important of all,' he said, 'we have laid our fears, there will be no one running around disrupting the life of mankind. I have "jumped" for want of a better description, three times. I might risk just one more but never a fifth. You see—I'm not sure about this—when you do it, when you change, it happens in *another dimension*.'

He paused, knocked out his pipe and began to refill it. 'I know this will sound as if it has no bearing on what I am telling you. Furthermore it is sheer supposition.'

He stopped to light the pipe. 'When I was a kid, a couple of very nasty little boys next door caught a sparrow and painted it bright red. No need to tell you what happened; it didn't last long. Other sparrows killed it—it didn't conform you see. Think what would happen if one of the red

corpuscles in the blood stream turned bright green. It would be destroyed irrespective of whether it was still performing its functions or not.'

He paused and smiled faintly. 'As I understand it, all matter is basically atomic, from gas to steel. Gas is gas because its atomic structure is arranged in a certain way and steel is steel because its atomic structure is different. One thing our scientists have yet to establish, however, is the momentum of movement of these structures. All move, like planets round a parent sun according to a *fixed pattern*. The purpose of this is, I believe, to confine us to *our own dimension*. Maybe in the great scheme of things we perform a function. Just as the red corpuscles perform a function hauling oxygen around the body. We live on a higher level, we can think, but we could be performing a function just the same.'

He studied the smoking bowl of his pipe. 'I think, somewhere within the functioning human, is a control unit, a governor, if you like, the purpose of which, automatically, is to keep us as we should be, a *fixed image* within the nuclear pattern for which we were created.'

'The combination of drugs used by Bowls and myself made that inner control unit subject to our personal wills. We could break out of this dimension, rearrange our atomic structures and return to our own dimension as something else.'

He laid the still smoking pipe on his desk and looked at Sarranac tiredly. 'When I jumped the third time, I realised that this "*fixed image*" had another purpose beside the functional—*it is protective*. Like the red sparrow and the green corpuscle, once we leave the set pattern of this dimension we become vulnerable. The gulf which sets one dimension apart from another is merely the rate of their nuclear movements—like two vehicles passing one another at different speeds and in darkness.'

He picked up his pipe and clamped it between his teeth. 'The science is probably full of holes, all the rest supposition, but this I do know—on my last "jump" *something nearly got me*. Relatively, time is different there and, each time one jumps, transition takes longer. Too many jumps and they would be alert and perhaps waiting—a foreign body in an alien blood stream, if you follow me. *This fixed image doesn't belong in that dimension*.'

He put down his pipe again and produced a bottle and two glasses from a lower drawer. 'This has been here for eight years, not a drinker, you know. But I can use one now—join me?'

Sarranac smiled faintly. 'Yes—yes, I think I will—that's enough, thank you.'

He sipped and looked at the other thoughtfully. 'You made sense, I followed your theory closely. I cannot agree to it all, but within its structure, it was logical.'

'Thank you, glad you don't think I'm crazy.' He downed his drink and coughed. 'Just went through it in time, it seems. Received this today.' He handed the other a printed letter.

Sarranac studied it. 'This is cruel.'

M'Guire shrugged. 'Expedient, a younger man in my place, termination at the end of the month. I'll get a lump sum, of course, but—' He picked up his pipe and didn't finish the sentence.

'What will you do?' There was genuine distress in Sarranac's eyes.

M'Guire shrugged. 'Well, financially, I'm rich, never spent much, invested wisely, enough to live in comparative

luxury for another lifetime. Guess I'll spend my declining years abroad somewhere. Always fancied Rio; don't know why.'

Rio was hot, modern, with palms lining the wide white streets and a beautiful expensive esplanade.

M'Guire spent the first three months on the beach acquiring a tan, but it was not the same M'Guire. This was a young man, in his early thirties, dark haired, handsome.

He sat in a deck chair, knowing he had cheated and not really ashamed, only a little uneasy at his own temerity. He hadn't bought himself immortality, only another lifetime. When he, in this body, became old, he would die in a normal way.

He mused briefly. It'd been quite tricky, leaving his worldly goods to a younger man who did not then exist as such.

Despite the hot sun, he shivered visibly. He could never do another jump. This time, they had nearly got him and he still woke in a sweat dreaming about it. A world of sullen red twilight, long black shadows in the hollows of the rolling endless land. No tree, no bird, no rock or cliff or ocean, only the dark red cloud stream constantly overhead.

This time, as he had predicted to Sarranae, they were alert and waiting. They had come swirling across that dreadful barren landscape from all directions—Things like huge black bed-sheets, swirling and then extended to envelope him.

He'd got back to his own dimension just in time, one of the things had been spreading itself above him.

He lit his pipe and glanced uneasily over his shoulder but there was only the sunlight and gay crowded beach.

Everything had gone well for the first two months but suddenly things had changed. M'Guire had never been able to say for certain but he *knew* he was being followed. The clerk at the hotel had told him that a woman had enquired at the desk and asked many questions.

Instinctively, his hand went to an inner pocket and felt the comforting butt of the small automatic. They couldn't follow him from *there*, could they?

So often now, he was aware, of someone close, almost peering over his shoulder but, when he turned quickly, there never seemed to be anyone suspicious in sight.

He could feel it *now*, he turned quickly, but there was only a young woman occupying a chair some four feet away. A strikingly beautiful young woman, with blue-black hair and huge dark eyes.

She seemed unaware of his existence but as she settled herself gracefully in the chair, she glanced briefly in his direction.

Something inside him went cold. There was something strangely *familiar* in that brief glance.

M'Guire rose slowly, stretched casually, picked up his newspaper and strolled away but inside he was all panic. She knew, he *knew* she knew. What was she—some sort of

special agent? Ridiculous, he'd done nothing illegal.

He shivered, some time, perhaps when he was asleep, she'd turn into a thing like a black sheet and come swirling silently through the window.

He reached the esplanade, made to flag a taxi and changed his mind. No, taking a taxi might give the show away. He'd stroll casually back to the hotel, keep in the crowds. Once he got to the hotel, however, he'd be up and away. He'd put two continents and an ocean between them, might take some little time to find him. In that time, of course, he'd be across another ocean to another land.

He reached the hotel and forced himself to stroll across the foyer. The desk clerk seemed to look at him a little oddly but no doubt he was imagining it, nerves, he was all keyed-up.

Deliberately, almost as an exercise in self-control, he forced himself to think of other things as the elevator bore him upwards.

He remembered his last meeting with Sarranae.

'We shall keep in touch, I hope.'

The old man had shaken his head sadly. 'No, M'Guire, I think not. We have become friends, let us leave it so.' He had put his hand briefly to his side. 'I have something here, it is inoperable.' Strangely he had managed a sincere smile. 'I shall devote my remaining months to the study of your theories and, of course, the fixed image.'

M'Guire blinked and stepped out of the elevator. He himself had been so full of self-pity, pushing sixty-five and out of job. That sort of thing made one feel ashamed.

He reached his room, inserted the key in the lock and opened the door—

'*You!*' It seemed that cold winds blew suddenly around him. 'How the hell did you get here?'

'It was' very simple, I took a taxi and bribed the desk clerk.' She smiled up at him from the low comfortable chair. 'It has taken a long time to find you, to make absolutely sure.'

'And now you are sure?' The automatic was cold in his hand.

'It's very simple, we have many matters to discuss, an association to resume on a different footing.'

'There is some mistake, I have never seen you before in my life.' M'Guire could feel sweat beading his forehead.

'Then I must introduce myself.' She laughed softly. 'One question, however,—do you find me attractive.'

'Oh, for God's sake—'

'Answer my question, please.'

'Yes, if you must know, if one can find an executioner attractive.'

'Executioner? Oh, my dear, you are quite wrong. I can understand your alarm, however. I was alarmed too, I made a mistake somewhere in the jump—'

She rose gracefully, extending her hand. 'Don't be afraid, please. My name is Sarranae—Greta Sarran. You know, M'Guire, I'm beginning to rather enjoy being a woman—'

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THE SCALES OF FRIENDSHIP

KENNETH BULMER

The first thing Fletcher Cullen did when he crawled back to consciousness in the dark alley was put one hand to his head.

The granite kerb served as a pillow and muddy water sluiced over his Adam's apple. The second thing he did, and possibly the more important of the two, was put his other hand to his wallet pocket.

He needn't have bothered, of course.

The wallet pocket was as bare as a floor show at the Starburst and Garter.

He groaned, wincing as pain flowed down over his head and eyes. 'Where's the morgue on this pest-hole of a planet? Move over, chums. You've got company.'

A rusty voice with a hollow booming echo sounded over his shoulder.

'Make that two. The morgue tempts me strongly, ol' buddy.'

'You too, hey, pal?' said Cullen. He heaved himself up to a sitting position. Shadows in the alley gyrated wildly from the swinging lamps sparsely spotted here and there. He looked for the owner of the voice.

Trash lay heaped and blowing in the wind. A line of dustbins leaned against a wall, the trash cans full to overflowing. A dead animal of unknown parentage and dubious ancestry mouldered beside a discarded shoe. A shattered spacehelmet rolled back and forth and muddy water sloshed inside it.

'Where are you pal?' asked Cullen, squinting his eyes. 'Do you need a helping hand?'

'A power-jack would be more to the nub of the thing, ol' buddy. They surely spiked my brew!'

Again Cullen stared into the alley.

'Where are you?' he asked again.

A dustbin moved over against the wall.

Despite his pain-buzzing head, Cullen chuckled.

'Dumped you in a garbage can, did they?'

The voice boomed with a tarter tone.

'I don't quite follow—?'

The dustbin rolled over towards Cullen. It looked a normal dustbin, with neatly corrugated sides and a convex lid and concave base. He could see no handles.

About to open his mouth with a fresh offer of help, some gay quip about winking his newly-found pal out of the dustbin, Cullen stopped—just in time.

A slit appeared in the metal about a foot from the top, a long thin prehensile arm appeared, caught a purchase against the gutter, pushed. The dustbin levered itself upright.

'Whew! I can roll fifty miles an hour if I have to, but it always scrambles my motor reflexes, addles my brains, if you know what I mean, ol' buddy.'

Cullen said: 'I'd guess it'd dizzy anyone.'

Then, carefully, he added: 'I'm not exactly used to being addressed by what appears to be a dustbin.'

A loud long sigh. 'You've never met a Rolphollan, then, before?'

'Never have.'

The lid of the bin rose a fraction and a large, bright and extremely luminous eye whipped out on a stalk. It sliced the dank air towards Cullen, stopped six inches from his face, rotated, sized him up and down, whipped back to the bin and remained, regarding him with a lambent unwinking stare.

'A terran,' the voice boomed from the dustbin. 'I see. A stiff-necked lot—endoskeletal—'

'We have, if you'll pardon me, quite a number of advantages over exoskeletal forms—'

'Oh, sure. I'm both, myself. Although, at the moment, I'm not exactly myself, if you follow.'

'I do. But I don't remember just what gin mill it was where they slipped me the mickey. Do you?'

'No. My last memory is of leaving the spaceport in a taxi—'

'Say! That's as far back as I can go!'

'So!'

'As you say, so. They've a racket on this planet, then.'

'Get in the taxi, give the hotel address, then a whiff of gas, and they drag you to the alley, roll you, and leave you to rust—oh, I beg your pardon—to catch a cold.'

'I don't like that.'

'Neither do I, ol' buddy. My name's Klank—' That, at any rate, was what it sounded like. 'Of the family of Kherlank-It-Ty, of Rolphollol.'

'I'm Fletcher Cullen, of Earth, currently on this dump of Arbinveh trying to hire deep-sea salvaging equipment.'

'I came here to buy electronic automation devices for the farm back home.' A deep echoing sigh from the dustbin. 'They sized me up at a glance—yokel from the outback.'

'Don't fret, Klank. They rolled me, too—'

'And...?'

'Too right, pal. Shall we go?'

The dustbin extended four long, thin and extraordinarily sinewy legs from the lower end of his carapace and set off. Cullen had to jog trot to keep up. They headed for the spaceport.

'My family need that electronic equipment, Cullen, ol' buddy. The crooks in the taxi took all our money.'

'They took all mine, too. And it was only borrowed so I could raise my ship. Without *Firefly* I'm a dead duck in this galaxy.'

Abruptly a wicked whip-like tentacle licked out from Klank. A serrated claw the size of a tree-felling power-saw lashed past Cullen's head. He ducked, whirled.

Four scaled and clawed aliens hurled themselves at Cul-

len and Klang, whistling shrill invectives, brandishing a butcher's shopful of cleavers and hatchets and saws.

'Stand clear, Cullen, ol' buddy!' Klang roared. 'My temper and my circulation both need a little work out right now!'

The aliens attacking them were bent on easy plunder, not knowing that their two intended victims had just been rolled.

The first one brought a cleaver down in one claw and a hatchet up in another. Klang opened some more orifices in the periphery of his carapace. Two whip-like tentacles sizzled out, wrapped themselves around the alien's two claws and jerked. The alien, screeching, cartwheeled over Klang's head and smashed against the wall.

Cullen ducked as bits and pieces of armoury and alien spattered about him.

A second alien, undaunted, charged in.

'That's my boy, Klang!' yelled Cullen. He snatched up the hatchet and jumped onto the crab-like back of the third alien. Klang upended his opponent in a whirling spray of action like a Catherine Wheel firing on alternate cylinders.

The alley filled with flying debris.

Abruptly Cullen shouted: 'Look out for the last one—here's a Grichal!'

The Grichal waddled forward over the mess of his former companions. His long slender feinting claw kept flicking out before him. Cullen dragged back on the alien beneath him, watching for the quick and lethal sweep from the Grichal's other claw, the heavy, solid carving claw.

'I like rich juicy meat on bones!' purred the Grichal through his furry mouth. 'Come to me without a fuss, Earthman, nicely, juicily...'

Klang picked up a discarded knife and threw it. It bounced off the Grichal.

Cullen didn't bother to speak now. Grichals had no sense of humour.

The alien beneath him twisted, trying to dislodge the tenacious human. Cullen rolled with the movement. His spacebooted feet scraped the ground, his legs stiffened, he thrust with both arms, the corded muscles straining.

The alien tottered. The Grichal's slashing carving-claw swished through the air aimed at his proposed meal.

Cullen ducked, heaved.

The claw went *thwaackssh* through the alien. He screeched once.

The Grichal slobbered in frustrated anger.

'Don't try to fob me off with slop inside exoskeletons!'

He lunged forward, purring through his furry mouth, his feinting claw flickering.

Klang opened up his lid and shot out a thick and roundly shining shaft. It uncoiled to an amazing length. It wrapped around the Grichal's carving-claw, yanked, sprang like a released steel spring.

The Grichal catapulted up into the air.

When it landed the shell split.

'That's the first time I've seen anyone handle a Grichal, old lad,' said Cullen admiringly. 'What a pong! Come on, Klang—let's run!'

The Rolphollan gurgled with good humour.

'We handle tougher beasties than that back on the farm.'

With a nonchalant snap Klang brought all his various extended limbs back into his carapace. Cullen blinked as tentacles, claws, hands, shafts, whipped up and disappeared.

The four thin legs stirred into motion.

This time Cullen had to run to keep up.



•EDDIE JONES•

The four criminals they had left in the alley had come from four different planets, obviously, even if those planets were not immediately identifiable from the creatures' physiognomy. Only the Grichal, an alien species Cullen had met before, had been familiar to him.

The spacecraft when at last they reached it showed flat and barren in the arc lights. A few ships stood ready for take-off. The run had cleared Cullen's head. He nodded towards the taxi rank outside the terminal building.

'D'you spot your joker, Klang?'

The luminous eye swivelled, calculatingly.

'Nope, ol' buddy. It was a green hovertaxi with a grinning hobgoblin sign—'

'The very same,' confirmed Cullen.

'I didn't recognise the make. Robot controlled, of course—'

'So that means we were gassed in the taxi and then someone else rolled us. Maybe we should have broken open a few of the dives backing on that alley—'

'Unlikely, Fletch, ol' buddy. They'd have dragged us a ways off.'

'True. Look out for the grinning hobgoblin, then . . .'

They wandered across to the terminal building as though they belonged there. Lights splashed stained concrete. A few aliens lounged at the lighted windows.

'This is a dump of a planet, this Arbinyeh,' said Cullen. 'My ship, *Firefly*, is sunk on Sitaz, and I borrowed passage and hire money from—friends—there. It'll be a big job.'

'If I didn't have to hurry back to Rolphollol it would be my pleasure to accompany you back to Sitaz and help salvage your ship, Fletch, ol' buddy. But business calls.'

A red light began to blink frenetically on the tower.

'Ship due,' said Klang. He sounded hopeful.

Cullen perked up. 'Keep that blinding ocular of yours peeled, Klang, old lad. This might be it.'

It was it.

The ship making planetfall swooped down enveloped in the miasmic glow from her drive. Like a falling gemstone she plunged through atmosphere and finished precisely on the marked landing plot.

'Wonder what world she's from?' said Klang wistfully.

'Wherever it is, Klang, they'll have good guys and bad guys, and guys out to pick your pockets. Those people aboard will have hypnotized the local language, like us, and be all ready for Arbinyeh.'

Klang made a sound like oil gushing out of a pump.

'And Arbinyeh is surely ready for them!'

Cullen had to chuckle, too.

The customs formalities were soon over. Taxis began to converge on the terminal building's main landing door.

A green taxi rumbled up out of the darkness, its hover skirt billowing dustily, nosed two red and one blue taxis out of the way. For some reason the robot equipment of the three dispossessed taxis did not object. Cullen frowned.

Klang waved a mandible. 'So there's collusion in high places!'

'Someone with rank to pull is organising this, sure!'

Clearly painted on the side of the taxi the sign of a grinning hobgoblin showed, leering in the uncertain light.

Figures began to emerge from the terminal building and enter taxis. Turbos whined. Hoverskirts distended.

Watching the green taxi from the shadows between lights they saw a tall figure loom momentarily before ducking down to enter. A high complaining voice grumbled; 'No respect at all for a delicate female! I don't know what the

galaxy's coming to!'

The taxi glided away, puffing dust.

'You'd better climb on my back, Fletch, ol' buddy. And hang on tight!'

From Klang's carapace two sturdy limbs appeared, formed hooked extensions. Two others looped, ready and waiting.

Cullen jumped up, put his feet into the extensions and the loops coiled into handlebars. He gripped them, tightly.

'What else do you carry down in there, Klang? A kitchen sink, I assume, is de rigueur?'

'Huh,' snorted Klang, and started up.

They trundled into top gear. The night wind blew through Cullen's hair and blustered about his ears. Klang had no difficulty keeping up with the taxi. They followed it towards the city.

Fireworks burst abruptly from the city, breaking into weaving chains of emerald and crimson, ochre and indigo. Rockets soared and burst soundlessly. From somewhere the sound of a great brazen bell boomed on the night wind. Cullen counted.

'Fifteen,' he said. 'That's midnight on Arbinyeh.'

'The locals appear to be having fun.'

A spinning cloud of tiny one man helicopters span down out of the night sky, converging on the leaning spire of a building that showed a finger of blackness into the gyrating firework display.

'D'you know what's going on, Klang?'

'Religion, I'd guess, Fletch, ol' buddy. Back on the farm my pack-leader kept on fazing me to go to church but there was always too much work to do—'

'Yeah. It's a hard galaxy.'

'They like to live up their old-time religion here, tho'. Any idea on who's the local big-god-chief? He's getting quite a layout of hard cash.'

The rockets and screamers and Roman candles spouted glittering fire into the heavens.

'No idea. The green taxi doesn't seem to know what to do—look!'

The taxi with the hobgoblin insignia swerved to avoid the settling mass of one-man helicopters. People of all races and shapes sprang out, began to dance in a wild ring. They swayed revolving towards the black leaning spire. An orange archway glowed a volcanic invitation.

Now deep organ music boomed on the night air, picking up on the bell strokes, continuing the wild extravaganza.

The green taxi became embroiled with the carousing worshippers. Cullen saw it trying to continue and being caught at by tentacles, dragged to a halt, half overturned. A tall form jumped out, waving its arms frantically.

'That's torn it most disgustingly!' rumbled Klang. 'The passenger hasn't been gassed yet.'

'So we don't know where the taxi was going. Blast it!'

Cullen jumped off Klang. He started off towards the rout. He marched vigorously, swinging his arms, impatient.

'I'm going to give the opposition a little help!' he said jauntily. 'The tooter I get the passenger gassed the sweeter!'

Cullen shoved his way through the roistering crowd. He had no idea beyond a hazy memory of something called *The Mechanics Path to Paradise* of what form religion took on Arbinyeh and he couldn't recall what that cryptic reference was. Fireworks still blazed and snapped. Lights pirouetted. Aliens of many shapes gyrated. Many of them carried slide rules in their claws and talons and many-



•EDDIE JONES.

fingered hands.

Pushed and jostled, Cullen pushed and jostled right back. He hulked his way through towards the taxi which was going around in small circles, making a high-pitched whining noise, completely unable to figure out what to do.

The prancing worshippers kept swinging in towards the black spire and its orange gateway and surging back as though indulging in mystic rites. The noise shrilled to a crescendo. Shadows darted and wavered as the lights span and flickered. Incense bombs spouted coloured smoke and odours from a dozen plants.

'Join us! Join us and set foot upon the Pathway!' shrieked the whirling aliens.

'I don't have the price of the ticket right now,' shouted back Cullen, striding through.

The passenger from the taxi was swept up in the throng. Cullen caught a glimpse of a tall iridescent form, blue and green muted and intermingling like costly Saturnian satin, surrounded by jostling talons and claws, happily buffeted this way and that. The aliens laughed and sang and chirruped. They made a ghastly racket.

'Help me!' shrieked the passenger.

Her voice, shrill and somehow plummily glottal, reached out like a lady wrestler gurgling under the mud.

'I'm being abducted! Raped! Help! Help!'

'They won't hurt you!' Cullen yelled back, but his voice was drowned in the sea of singing chanting. Lights waved before his eyes. Yells and laughter broke like surf in his ears. He ploughed on towards the passenger.

Two aliens had her. One held her arms strapped to her sides and the other was about to hoist her legs up and, evidently with great joy and beatification, carry her into the black-spired temple.

Her voice moaned out now: 'They've got me! Raped! Help!'

'I don't care who goes in that confounded taxi!' yelled Cullen, beside himself with fury. 'Someone's going in, that's for sure! Here—you'll do, pal!'

He grabbed for a rotund furry little beast who cocked a leery eye at him and jumped sixteen feet straight up on a tall that uncoiled like a tickler.

'To hell with you, too, mac!' shouted Cullen offensively.

He knocked the alien holding the woman's legs aside and trampled over him in his eagerness to get to his companion. The other alien squawked.

'We only wanted a virgin! We didn't mean no harm, mister—'

'Save it, pal. Let go the lady!'

At that moment the passenger regained her breath and her strength. A muscular green arm broke the little alien's grip and floored him with a perfectly executed straight left. He slid back six feet on his shell. Two other spiny and knobby aliens who had been about to jump on the passenger thought better of it, Cullen took one out with a neat kick and the passenger just about squashed the second with a meaty thud from a ham-sized fist.

'I'm rescued!' shrieked the passenger. Her huge almond-shaped eyes glowed in the torchlights. 'Sir Galahad has come!'

'Not yet, baby,' grunted Cullen. 'Come on—this way!'

He grabbed a hand that made a bunch of bananas seem like limp strings, and tugged her along. Like a young elephant she pounded after him. He headed for the taxi still circling and screeching in the din.

'You saved me! Oh, how can I thank you!'

'Don't bother right now!' snapped Cullen. 'Here's your taxi—hop in!'

She stood a good seven feet six inches. Her face glowed over Cullen like a harvest moon. Her mouth, heavily rouged, pursed up in a kiss like a sink plunger.

'Oh—you saved me! My hero!'

Cullen dodged and she toppled forward into his arms. He felt immense breasts, massive corsetry, the soft pliancy of sorbo rubber. He staggered back, her full weight dragging on him, bending his back like a sapling in a tornado. He shoved back and felt his vertebrae mutiny.

She drooled over him. Her green eyes, widely spaced and overhung with enormous red eyebrows, sparkled with delicious danger and adventure.

Her face showed she was not a Terrestrial, and yet she had all the equipment possessed by a human woman—trouble was, she had an overabundance of it, everything in triplicate, so to speak.

'What you have saved me from, my hero!'

'Yeah,' said Cullen, savagely yanking open the taxi door. 'They'd have enjoyed themselves with you.'

'How can I thank you! How can I repay you!' She fumbled in her purse the size of a suitcase. Her hat fell off to reveal a waving mass of scarlet and carotry hair bound and looped with diamonds and pearls. The whole mass shook. A pair of bright eyes and a sharp beak appeared.

'Hey!' said Cullen, startled. 'Who's that?'

She left her purse and snapped her fingers beside her hair. 'Oh, that's Ticky-wicky! Get back in there, naughty boy! It's not dinner-time yet!'

The beak and eyes vanished in the parti-coloured haze.

She gazed at Cullen adoringly.

'I'm Pansantius Trycephon—but my friends call me Pansy. You call me Pansy—my hero!'

'Okay, Pansy. Now I've rescued you from a fate more interesting than death why don't you just settle down in this nice taxi and have a good snooze—that is—'

'Knowing you, how my maidenly heart trembles! With all these horrible scales and shells and claws, to see a real man again! Oh, my heart! You have won me with your manly strength, my Galahad!'

She tried to embrace him again. Arms the size of barrage balloons linked together clasped him firmly.

'Leggo!' yelled Fletcher Cullen in unmanly panic.

She kissed him.

He felt as though a monstrous suction pump had him in its deadly clutches. The world went black for a moment.

Cullen staggered back, choking, panting, gasping.

'Get in there!' he screamed. 'Woman!'

She fluttered a hesitant maidenly laugh.

'Oh! How strong! How masterful! Oh, at last I have found my true knight.'

'Good night! And Cullen put his back to her and bundled her in. She founced down in a mass of billowing skirts. The taxi door slammed.

'Make for the city!' Cullen rapped at the robot.

The taxi started up. Pansy put her head out of the window—not without difficulty.

'My hero! Rest assured! I shall see you again—you have won me over with your passion and your manly strength! All life and all romance lies before us!'

The taxi spurted dust.

She shouted once more, yearningly.

'How my heart rejoices to find so romantic an endo-skeletal man! We flesh and blood humans are the happiest

in the whole galaxy!

The taxi, flaunting its grinning hobgoblin, whined out of sight. Cullen sagged.

A burbling gurgle of oil running out of a sump brought his head around.

Klang trundled up, waving his eye and two tentacles.

'Congratulations, Fletch, ol' buddy! You've made a conquest there! How she adores you! What romance!

'What!' shrieked Cullen. 'You tool! Can't you see she's nothing like me!'

'Well, ol' buddy—male and female, even I know about that. Why, back on the farm, we—'

'She's not a Terran, you lame brain!'

'So what? You're both the same physiologically, aren't you? You're a very lucky feller, ol' buddy.'

'Oh, brother!' moaned Fletcher Cullen.

'The cream of the jest is,' chuckled Klang as they cantered through the darkness. 'You rescued her and stuck her in that taxi to be gassed!'

'I could hope she never wakes up! She's—she's rapacious!'

'You should be so lucky.'

'Aw—get lost.'

So in happy concert they followed the taxi towards the city.

The taxi swirled up a broad avenue, followed at a reasonable distance by Klang and Cullen, and turned down a cross street to halt before the awninged portico of a four storey building of white brick. Neons picked out a writhing snake-like sign in Arbinyn characters.

'On Rolpholol,' sighed Klang, 'That'd be "The Farmer's Rest".'

'And on Terra, "Ben's Bar and Grill".'

Articulated robots whose scarlet paint had been discreetly covered by grey plastic sheeting cantered out and bore Pansy within. There were four of them and their dynamos hummed up the scale as the weight came on.

Cullen chuckled.

'They'll rob her and chuck her out into the alley. What a thump that's going to make.'

'I find it strange, Fletch, ol' buddy, at your callous disregard of a fellow human.'

'Fellow human my foot! She'd engulf me at a single gulp!'

The street remained deserted. The taxi departed and Klang and Cullen swaggered up to the door of Ben's Bar and Grill' or 'The Farmer's Rest' depending on your planet of origin.

'Hey!' gurgled Klang as though stricken by divine revelation. 'How do we get in? We've no money.'

'I remember my father telling me that when you have no money is the time to act the swell. He was a great character. Snatched my mother right out from a covey of indignant relatives and married her on the way to Sirius.' Cullen chuckled. 'Why, he'd just breeze right in here and have them all bowing and scraping.'

'My old man's still waiting for me to bring that electronic equipment,' grunted Klang, with a booming echo from somewhere inside his dustbin-like carapace.

'Check. If Sitaz wasn't a soft-sciences planet they'd have had some decent hardware to salvage my ship, and then I wouldn't be here. I'd have missed you, Klang, old sport.'

'Fletch, ol' buddy, the feeling is more than mutual.'

'Shall we go?'

'Let's.'

Together, they walked and strutted up the stone steps into the building.

They crossed the softly carpeted foyer beneath discreet lighting to the reception desk. Various assorted aliens sat or sprawled about the lounge watching private trid-di taped shows. A few robotic waiters trundled here and there bearing glasses and refreshments. Cullen hooked a glass, sniffed, beamed, and downed a glassful at a single swallow.

The robot waiter squeaked. Cullen frowned magnificently. He hooked a second glass.

'Would you care for a glass of this Tokyo-brewed whisky, Lord Krunchable? No? Well, then, waste is abhorrent to me—' He downed the second glass.

The robot clicked helplessly and scurried back to the bar for refills.

They ambled across to the desk. Cullen eyed the robot whose antennae stiffened.

'Lord Krunchable has a private penthouse suite reserved,' he said with heavy formality. 'Although with four stories how you can call anything a penthouse beats me. Well?' He snapped at the robot, who quivered. 'Get a flunkey to take us up.'

'B-but, sir—' The robot shorted out a couple of circuits, emitted smoke, and coughed. 'No reservations—'

'No reservations!' thundered Cullen. 'What is this dump—a civilised planet or a prison asteroid? Call the manager!'

The manager turned out to be a square-bodied Phalonim. His four arms waved in apology and his shaggy collie's head bowed and scraped. His four eyes and narrow funnel ears indicated his abject apologies, but—

'I am sorry, respected sir. No reservations have been made for Lord Krunchable—'

'I don't intend to bandy words with you!' snapped Cullen. 'If you don't want to lose all your star ratings in the next Galactic Handbook and Guide, I'd suggest you found the best suite in the place. And sharpish!'

The Phalonim keened his alarm. 'That eventually is to be devoutly avoided, respected sir.' He beckoned and a flunkey robot trundled up, spitting sparks. 'Suite for Lord Krunchable, the Lotus and Sapphire Suite—and look alive, you rattling machine!'

Cullen and Klang who looked every inch a veritable Lord Krunchable, followed the robot.

'Why?' whispered Klang in a whisper like a faucet spilling into an overflowing sink.

'Got to have a base to work from, old pal.'

'Ah!' Klang gurgled his appreciation. 'I like your style, ol' buddy—strange I've never heard of you before—'

'What?' said Cullen, urging the robot to speed. 'Why should you have?'

'Oh—I didn't mean that,' Klang said, and Cullen detected a new sharp note in that faucet-like gluggle.

In the suite to which the robot directed them Cullen padded around, checked the low-divan style beds and said imperiously: 'Have a proper rest couch sent up here for a Rolphollan—and jump to it.'

A wall screen lit up and the Phalonim manager's collie-like head appeared.

'Your baggage, respected sir and Lord, shall I—'

'We'll send for it,' said Cullen, loftily. He heard a weird double-echo when the manager spoke and he rubbed an ear thoughtfully. 'Now get lost.'

The screen died, the robot flunkey waggled a baggage claw that had not been used, chirruped and departed.

'Now, Klang, my old pal. When did you plant it?'

Klang gurgled merrily. 'You don't miss much, do you, Fletch, ol' buddy? It is strange your name isn't better known. I slipped it into the Phalonim's case-base. It's a burr type and should hold on long enough.'

'So you stuck a bug on the manager. Quick thinking. I'd like to see around your farm, some time.'

'Any time, ol' buddy. We're strictly a bunch of hick-planet farmers back home.'

The voice of the manager came from Klang's carapace and the Rolphollan turned up the gain.

'... Lord my rear left foot! He's nothing but a layabout—and that gangly Terran with him!'

A pause. Cullen raised his eyebrows at Klang, who made a singularly offensive sign with two tentacles.

The manager's voice resumed; evidently he was speaking on a phone.

'All right. A disposal of quickness and certitude is to be the best desirable outcome. Agreed. At once.'

They heard the click as the connection broke.

'So they're gonna dispose of us, are they?' gurgled Klang. His luminous eye swivelled around on its extension stalk, covering the entire suite. 'I see nothing suspicious here. Maybe it'll be straight forward thud and blunder?' He emitted more oil from that sump. 'I'm going to enjoy that.'

'And while you're happily bashing in heads, what about that Pansy dame, and the cash we've lost?'

'Ye-es. Business before pleasure, I suppose, ol' buddy. Come on.'

The manager's voice spoke again from the speaker in Klang's carapace.

'The Lotus and Sapphire Suite, you! Take those clowns out and in the alley to be dumped they will be. They're not Phalonim, so to be careful is not necessary.'

'We've got to avoid them,' said Cullen firmly. 'I'm sorry about that, Klang, old sport; but business first.'

Outside in the corridor a flurry of activity bounced from the open elevator door and a trio of grey swathed scarlet robots trundled out an intricate contraption of chromed-steel tubes and gaily-coloured canvas webbing.

'That looks a mighty fine bed,' Klang sighed.

They turned the other way and headed for the service elevator.

Klang punched the button. Cullen, looking down the corridor at the web and tube contrivance, said, 'Any more from the manager?'

'Nothing. I've turned the gain down. But nothing.'

'Well, keep listening out. It wouldn't surprise me if you had a multi-lights radio in that dustbin of yours.'

'You'd be surprised, Fletch, ol' buddy.'

The elevator doors slid open and five aliens, all of a pattern, stepped out. Tall and bulky, they wore half-armor of beryl-steel and carried in their talons compact power guns that glinted blue-steel in the lighting. Their faces, like Aztec idols' grinning visages, expressed—very clearly in unmistakable interstellar terms—their readiness to shoot to kill.

'You with us will come,' said the leader from his wide frog's mouth.

'Your confounded bed,' yelled Cullen. 'They'd have taken the other elevator but for that!'

With guns prodding Cullen's backbone and Klang's carapace they stepped into the elevator. From the pent-house floor, the elevator shot—up.

The elevator rose one floor and then the gates clanked open

onto the roof. Against a moonless sky the stars flaunted their proliferating splendor. A planetary flier ghosted down to a feather-light touchdown and beings poured from the open doors. The ship's atmosphere fins and sleek lines indicated a non-Arbinyeh product. The guns prodded Cullen and Klang more forcefully.

'Get back!' shouted the frog-faced leader. 'It's de Vitry's mob!'

He fired his power gun on full charge and crisped the leading wave of charging aliens. They were small, eight-legged creatures, with oval heads set well down between humped shoulders. They began firing with needle guns.

Cullen hit the floor with a resounding thump.

Lights flashed. The spurting wash of energy gushed over the scene. Aliens screamed. The frog-faced leader dived for Klang, tilted him, trundled him back into the elevator. One of the aliens shrieked and collapsed, shredded by needles. Needles chingled all around the open elevator. Another alien went down, his power gun sliding from an abruptly lax talon. Needles chattered from beryl-steel armor.

Into the elevator rolled Klang. He was blaspheming and roaring, and beginning to sprout all manner of weird tentacles and claws. The bright blast of power from the frog-faced aliens' guns momentarily held back the charge of the eight-limbed aliens.

Cullen rolled, scooped up the abandoned energy gun and went on rolling into the shadows behind the elevator wheel-house projecting onto the roof.

The elevator door began to close.

'Fletch, ol' buddy!' roared Klang's cavernous voice.

Cullen didn't waste breath answering. He inched back into the shadows, holding the gun up and ready; but not firing. In the lurid glare of the power-guns' discharges and the erratic patterning of light and shade on the roof he slid away, for the moment undetected.

A group of needle-gun waving aliens crowded at the elevator gates.

'Chuck a grenade down!' shouted one.

'Bring a heavy-duty laser—' yelled another.

'Here comes the boss!' yelled a third, making room.

Among all the aliens the sight of another terrestrial human being came as a shock to Cullen. He lay, breathing thinly, peering out.

De Vitry strode up impatiently. His dark face with its heavy beard and flattened nose, the imperious tilt to his blocky head, all his broad square body's dynamism, promised more tough trouble than all the other aliens put together. He kicked eight-legged aliens out of the way as he advanced.

'You imbecilic, cretinous, dunderheaded crew of block-heads!' he raved. 'We needed everything nice and quiet. We needed that elevator—and what do you do? You shoot the place up and rouse every damn cop on Arbinyeh!' He kicked the elevator gates. 'I should have signed on a bunch of monkeys with computer wire-ins, I should!'

The aliens milled. Their gobbling resentment rose unheeded to the stars.

'All right! All right, you stupid thick-headed no-goodniks! Get down to the street and shoot everything that moves! If we've got to strong arm in, we'll strong arm in! And we'll do it in style! No one in this alien's galaxy will say that Antoine de Vitry doesn't do things in style! Move!'

A swarm of the hireling aliens disappeared off the roof like bloated spiders chittering down the stairs. The frog-

faced aliens wouldn't be fool enough to let the elevator up. Other eight-legged aliens—Cullen didn't know the planetary origins of either of these alien races—headed back to the planetary flier. Still others began to throw grenades down the elevator shaft. Cullen heard the brutal explosions conussing up through the fabric of the building.

He started to edge back and a talon hooked a horny serrated edge over his neck. A smell of dead stoat whiffed up. A fruity voice chortled with glee.

'Hey! Boss! I've caught me a snooter!'

At once de Vitry snapped his gun up. 'Bring him over here, Cosgrove. And handle him gently. You'll snip his neck in two! Take it steady, you pin-brain!'

Lifted like a blind kitten, Cullen was dumped down before de Vitry. He tried to swallow. It was like pushing a football down a garden hose. He couldn't speak.

'Let him up.'

Cullen flopped and another talon hoisted him by the collar. He swayed, fighting to get his breath back.

'Who the hell are you? Speak up quick—I haven't much time.'

Making feeble motions with his hands at his throat Cullen tried to reply. He didn't raise a croak.

'Cosgrove, you stupid jikrat! Let him breath!'

The talon around his neck slackened its grip. Cullen took a great whooping breath of air and black tadpoles swam across his vision and flame-winds roared in his ears.

The alien holding him looked like a domestic Grichal, with a smaller fork-like claw in place of the feinting claw. But the carving claw snapped just as powerfully.

Cullen massaged his neck.

'Speak up, numbskull. You're a terrestrial, so okay. I thought I had this piece of the action to myself. What's your angle?'

With a tremendous effort Cullen managed to squeeze words out of his mangled throat.

'How come he's called Cosgrove?'

'Oh, a clever guy!' De Vitry casually back-handed Cullen across the mouth. He went with the blow; but it still stung.

'Speak up. How much are you prepared to pay?'

'What's it worth?'

'What?' De Vitry thrust his blocky head forward and his black beard bristled under Cullen's nose. 'If you don't know that what in hell are you on Arbinyeh for?'

'You should have come here in a green taxi with a grinning hobgoblin on it,' ground out Cullen. 'They didn't expect you to arrive in such style.'

De Vitry boomed a nasty laugh. 'So there are more, are there? Well, I might have expected it. But remember this, de Vitry is going to get it. Never worry your little head over that. I'm going to be the one to get it!'

'I wish I could help you to get it,' said Cullen. 'I'd like to give it to you now.'

Cosgrove started to chuckle and de Vitry lifted his gun and Cosgrove, through his Grichal-like furry mouth, said: 'Sorry, boss. This little 'un is a rare bright bird, though.'

'He'll be rarer when I've done with him. De Vitry glowered on Cullen. 'Take him into the flier. Tie him up. I'll find out just what his game is.'

Cosgrove did not delay in obedience. He lifted Cullen and started off to the flier. Cullen had to cling onto the power gun stuffed down into his belt under the shirt. He tried to get the thing out and couldn't manage it against the cruel twist of talons holding him fast like ball in a rugby scrum.

'And, Cosgrove, if you let him escape, I'll de-talon you—instead of a Lesser Grichal you'll be a Nothing Grichal!'

Carried into the planetary flier through the forward port, Cullen was carried by the Lesser Grichal into the chart room immediately abaft the navigation deck and flung down into a metal corner. Cosgrove balanced on his rear legs and looked about for rope.

'He's a real tough character, that de Vitry,' began Cullen, massaging his neck tenderly.

'All you Earth people are arrogant prideful masters,' the Lesser Grichal purred, producing a length of flex.

'It comes from having a soft skin—'

'Skin that cuts easily, that bleeds, that bruises! You're nearly as terrible as the Zdrung—'

'What!' snapped Fletcher Cullen. 'Are they snooping around the Boreas Cluster? What do they want?'

Cosgrove flicked the flex into a loop. 'Terrible and vicious are the Zdrung. Scaled backs, they have, and spiked tails, but their faces and bodies in front are very like yours Terran. I think maybe having only four limbs makes an intelligent organism pathologically unhappy and therefore dangerous and cruel.'

'I admit it'd be difficult to get along with less than four.' Cullen eyed the flex. 'But in this cluster we people of all kinds of planetary origins are all mixed up. New planets, old planets, solar systems long settled and others being opened up—why, we're like a real Irish stew bubbling in this little corner of the galaxy.'

'And there are plenty of pickings for those strong enough to take what they want!'

'Like your boss de Vitry. Anyone can buy a ship these days and nip down to a hick planet and hire himself a private army. It's being done all the time.' He smiled reflectively. 'Not that it did Hertzog or Bolande Yonkul much good.'

'We will take the process for ourselves, and then we will all be rich!' Cosgrove lashed the flex around Cullen as though personally supervising a freshly dead Pharaoh. 'The boss has said so!'

Cullen stretched his muscles as the flex bit.

'Pity he didn't tell you about his deal with the Scarlet Guild of Ramileh!'

Cosgrove purred in shocked surprise. A new voice, a smooth honey-blended voice, chimed in and Cullen cocked an eye to the girl standing in the chart room doorway. She pointed a nasty little Intestine-Severer at him, the muzzle centred on his stomach. The barrel trembled.

'Tell me what you know at once, Terran! Or I shall shoot your stomach out through your backbone! Talk!'

'Well, now,' said Cullen pleasantly. 'If I lose my guts and my backbone I shan't be in any shape to tell you what you're panting to hear—shall I?'

Again the barrel trembled.

'Tell me what you know of the Scarlet Guild of Ramileh!'

'What does anyone know of them? Practically nothing. You ought to ask de Vitry what he knows—maybe the answer would be more illuminating.'

Cosgrove swung his carving claw in a nervous clash.

'I don't figure the Boss would dicker with that bunch of galaxy ghouls—would he?' He sounded uncertain.

The Intestine-Severer wavered. The gun shot a sheaf of beryl-steel blades, triangles of death, that were designed for shipboard use. They wouldn't hurt the metal hull of a ship

but would chew up flesh and bone and scale and armour with their savagely powerful blows. They were the needle gun's big brothers without the range, and with the capacity of total severance in a single shot.

They were the typical weapon of the Zdrung.

'I'll start with your left leg,' the Zdrung girl said. Her honey-blended voice sounded as though a few bee-stings had been left in the honey-mash.

'Thoughtful of you, miss.' Cullen moved against the flex. It gave an inch. 'I'll tell you whatever I can. But first I'm concerned over your safety. Cosgrove, here, doesn't like Zdrungs and he's loyal to de Vitry—'

The I-S gun flicked back and forth between the Lesser Grichal and the Terran.

'I'll take care of Cosgrove—he's only an animated lame-brained shell on legs! Now, speak up!'

Cosgrove's furry mouth purred insulted anger.

Cullen looked at the girl. At that, from the front, you wouldn't at first know she wasn't a terrestrial from some warm and southern clime, with a peach-bloom on her skin and a shape beneath a simple russet tunic that could make a man dizzy with desire. Her back was concealed by a long yellow cape and only the tip of her spiked tail showed. Her dark hair fell about her shoulders. The ripeness of her full lips, shining in the ship-lights, and the steady regard of the sloe-black eyes clearly indicated a woman of passion and fire and blood.

'You didn't tell me your name?' asked Cullen lazily.

She breathed out, hard, then, drawing a breath that made the tunic bulge, she said 'Maessa Makrul. Now—'

'What's the Zdrungan interest in this neck of the galaxy, Mae?'

She shook the gun in his face and he leaned back, looking up at her with a long insolent stare. His hands behind his back worked on the flex.

'You will tell me now about the Scarlet Guild! Now! D'you hear?'

'Oh, I can hear all right, Mae. You shouldn't breath so hard, it plays havoc with your poise.'

The flex shifted another inch.

Cosgrove inched around, lifting his forked claw.

'Shall I belabour him, my lady?'

'Quiet, Grichal—idiot! This is work for intelligent beings!'

She turned away from the Lesser Grichal, lifted the gun, aimed it at Cullen's left knee.

'You will be a three-limbed terrestrial in exactly one second if you do not tell me!'

Cullen opened his mouth, froze, swung his face towards Cosgrove. The Lesser Grichal stood stiffly unmoving, claw upraised.

The Zdrungan girl let out a hiss of surprised fear.

'No!' yelled Cullen historically. 'No, Cosgrove! Look out, Mae, behind you—'

The girl ducked, swerved, brought the I-S gun around and triggered a blast all in a single smooth action. The centre section of the Lesser Grichal sprayed out as the beryllium steel knives struck like a gauntleted fist.

In the same moment Cullen shredded away the last of the flex and rose. He knocked the I-S gun aside and pushed Maessa. The girl staggered, tripped over her tail entangled in the yellow cape, sprawled. Cullen stooped and retrieved the I-S gun and held it negligently on the Zdrungan.

'Now,' he said pleasantly. 'I believe we were having a little question and answer session. Let's continue.'

She glared back at him, her breast heaving, one hand to her mouth. Then she straightened her shoulders and the yellow cape flared.

'Just who are you, anyway, Terran?'

'I'm just a galactic travelling man, making a living. Name's Fletcher Cullen. You surely made a mess of poor Cosgrove.'

'Grichal rubbish. Of no account. When de Vitry finds out—'

'That you shot his aide? Cosgrove might have been a funny shape, a lobster with claws, but he was still an intelligent being, a person. There are all kinds of aliens running about the Boreas cluster—'

'The Mzrtrian cluster!'

'You stick to your Zdrungan name, I'll use Terran. There's no general war on, it's everyone for himself. This cluster is going to attract more and more different people from all over the galaxy. What's your interest right now, Mae?'

She sniffed. 'As though I'd tell a mrunchick of a terrestrial!'

Cullen let that one go. Harsh clanking sounds echoed along the corridor from the port and the heavy rumble of voices, the clashing of claws.

Maessa Makrul opened her mouth to scream and Cullen put his left palm across it. He felt the lips writhe and he strained his palm flat so her sharp teeth could not bite. He grabbed her around the waist, still holding the I-S gun, and headed fast for a corridor locker. She struggled and he lifted her so her feet whipped clear of the deck.

He slammed her hard against the corridor wall and freed his right hand, snapped the locker open.

'If you use your tail, girl, I'll shred it off with your own gun! Inside!'

They bundled into the dark space and Cullen pulled the door shut. A ghostly light fell from the slit beside the door. The girl slumped. Heavy footsteps and the scrape of claws passed outside.

De Vitry's voice rumbled. 'We'll take off and get there first! These hicks don't think they can outsmart me!'

The uproar that ensued when the dispersed body of Cosgrove was found thundered down the corridor. A rush followed. Aliens shouted and called and the clang of doors echoed. Moments after the ship lifted.

'He's written us off, baby,' Cullen whispered. 'How's that for a pal?'

She wriggled once and was still.

Cleaning equipment pressed into Cullen's back. He sat down, still holding the girl, and sweated out the trip to— anywhere. Wherever they were being taken. The ship's motion indicated a brief burst of speed and then a long shallow dive. All the time Maessa Makrul half sat, half reclined on her tail, her body tense under Cullen's pressing hand. Her breathing steeled down to an angry sussionar.

The ship touched down, bumped, and stopped and the whine of dying engines brought a fresh stillness. Voices and feet and claws passed the locker door going the other way. The port doors clanged. Cullen waited.

Then he said softly: 'You smell of roses, Mae. Rather nice. For a Zdrungan.'

She tried to flick her spiked tail at him and the concealing yellow cape again entangled her. He took the hand from her face. Her lips had felt extraordinarily soft.

'And you stink, Terran!' she said viciously. 'If I hadn't

cloaked my back, my tail'd have—'

'I'm sure. Now—out!'

They emerged into the corridor and Cullen swung her towards the port. He showed her the I-S gun.

'Remember what you did to poor old Cosgrove. Keep quiet!'

Her hands hung at her sides. On her thin wrists platinum bracelets glinted. They walked towards the port.

The door stood open, guarded by a barrel-bodied chitinous alien with snappers at the ready, an energy gun in one tentacle. Cullen pushed his gun into Maessa's soft waist, just where the skin ended and the pangolin-like scales began. 'Cool it,' he said softly.

She did something to her russet tunic. It dropped away in front. At the same time her yellow cape billowed out. Her spiked tail caught Cullen around the knees and knocked him headlong.

'Yaxig!' screamed the girl. 'Quick! Help!'

She ran fleetly for the port, her clothing ballooning out and flying free. Her black hair rippled like a steamer's smoke. The alien flicked his gun around and Cullen, rolling over like a ball, triggered a burst of beryl-steel blades that chewed into the chitinous hide and shredded the alien into strips.

The girl cast a single horrified glance back. Her tawny body showed magnificently as she bounded out of the port.

Cullen lifted the gun. He saw the pangolin-like scales, russet and gold and silver, orange and purple, the erect tail with its softer female-spikes, he saw the lithe rounded legs flashing. He took first pressure on the trigger.

Maessa saw him—and screamed.

Then Cullen lifted the gun, pointed the barrel at the overhead. He waved his left hand. He opened his mouth in a wide smile.

Then the girl vanished into the star-shot darkness.

The stars looked down on Fletcher Cullen some two hours later as he crawled through a dusty thorn-bush, cursing as his black leather gloves caught on spikes, to spy a better position to check the brilliantly-lit building ahead. Tall, upside-down trees moved fitfully in the last of the night breeze. Soon it would be dawn.

Sentries paced before the closed doors.

Cullen grunted and studied the set-up. He had tossed down the Intestine-Severer when Maessa Makrul had run off into the darkness, and picked up the guard's energy weapon. It was a Cappadocian-made Pargeter Quad-O, a powerful if unlovely weapon. He pulled out the gun he had taken from the aliens on the roof when Klang had been dragged back into the elevator. This was a Terran-pattern Stonham-Argus Mark Twenty. Cullen had used the type before.

The sentries were joined by others and a guard change began. Cullen edged around the side of the building. A secondary entrance, guarded by a single Arbinyeh with a fine set of upper snappers and wearing a large and ornate bronze helmet, looked just as tough a proposition.

The muted sound of a ground-effect vehicle's turbines brought the guards to attention. Their power rifles snouted up.

Cullen pulled back through the thorn-bushes, cursed again, and crawled to look down onto the dirt road.

The red-painted gev flashed luridly under the lights, slowed, halted by the door. Guards tumbled out. Cullen tsk-tsked sympathetically as Pansantius Trycephon and

Klang were bundled out, firmly trussed, and carted inside.

Guards resumed pacing. The gev coughed its turbines, swirled around the corner. Cullen rose, padded in the shadows after it, giving the guards plenty of parade room.

At the rear of the building, standing isolated at a fork in the dirt roads leading over what appeared to be featureless grassland, Cullen saw the gev's tentacled driver lolling in his seat, watching a pocket tri-di. Cullen walked up quietly, hit the alien in the centre of his domed head with a gun butt, eased the limp body out. He climbed in, put the gev into motion and took off into the darkness.

Fifteen minutes later he swirled up importantly in a cloud of dust at the main doors.

'What's up, mac?' the bored voice of the guard sergeant sounded flat and uninterested.

'Late message,' Cullen said firmly. He strode for the doors. 'Open up, mac, pronto. What I've got to tell the big shots will make 'em jump.'

'Just so this detail finishes real soon,' grumbled the sergeant, waving for the guards to open the doors. Cullen stamped through into a foyer, turned at once to his right down a carpeted corridor. He acted as though he'd been here every day of his life.

A chitinous-covered alien carrying a tray and a white cloth scurried ahead. Him, Cullen showed the Pargeter.

'Where'd they stash the dame, mac?' he snarled without much pretence at ferocity.

The little alien squeaked. 'In the pantry down there—it's nothing to do with me, mac, I just work here.'

'Lead on, little beetle, and think of this gun.'

Chittering, the alien led Cullen to the pantry door.

Very gently, Cullen tapped the chitinous alien on the shiny pate, eased him to the floor. He banged on the door.

'Keep clear in there!' he shouted and fired the Pargeter Quad-O. It shot a bilious green wash of energy and the door sloughed. Brushing aside smoke, Cullen stepped through.

'Where's Klang?' he snapped at the bound figure of Pansy, who rolled her immense green almond-shaped eyes at him. 'The Rolphollan?'

'My hero!' she bleated, enraptured.

Cullen bent, opened his knife and slashed her bonds free. He didn't try to lift her up.

Pansy threw a hammerlock on him, brought her great mouth slobbering down for a big juicy thank-you kiss.

'Get off, Pansy!' yelled Cullen, squirming aside. He couldn't break her grip. She climbed all over him.

'Where's Klang!' he yelled, choking, coming up for air. 'This is no time for—'

'My Lancelot! My Galahad! You have saved me again!'

'He was only a little beetle-waiter,' said Cullen, struggling vainly in the grip of squashing arms. 'Let me up, Pansy! This gang of cut-throats will be down on us if we don't scam!'

Reluctantly, with a last splashy kiss, she let him up. A plastic-bound book fell from her ripped pocket. Cullen automatically read the clearly legible title.

Sir Thomas Malory
LA MORTE D'ARTHUR

He picked it up.

'Yeah,' he said, handing it back to Pansy. 'He spent most of his life in gaol, too.'

'I don't quite—'

'We've got to find Klang first—then—'

'I you mean that offensive garbage bin, he cannot be

far. They seemed to know him.'

'Ah!' said Cullen, wisely.

He grabbed her wrist and hauled her to the door. She danced along like a cartoon elephant.

Cullen poked his head out of the door, said: 'Whoops!' darted back, stuck his gun out and sprayed the corridor with green fire. The sound of screams and falling bodies and the smell of charred chitin wafted in. He jumped out again, dragging Pansy's quivering bulk, dashed like a tug towing a liner for the corner. As they cleared the bend a shower of needles sprayed the far wall.

'Have at them again!' carolled Pansy, waving her free arm. She did not duck and her seven foot six height brought her carroty head cracking into a ceiling beam. She staggered. From the perched hair two eyes and beak showed, chattering in fierce and blood-curling obscenities.

'Quiet, Ticky-wicky!' she said, gasping, holding her head. 'You naughty boy! Soap and water for your beak tonight!' Cullen dashed around the next corner and Pansy followed like a bride on the last straight to Gretna Green.

At the next intersection Cullen skidded to a halt, passing Pansy on in front like a twenty ton truck overhauling a mini, blattered a burst of green fire that crisped the head of the pursuit. He cracked in two more blasts, then padded rapidly after Pansy.

'So strong!' she was rambling on enthralled. 'So masterful!'

A swing door showed ahead. Cullen dived for it, bashed it open onto stairs, grabbed Pansy and swung on up. They pounded up two, three, four flights. Cullen's breathing remained steady. Pansy was giggling and chortling and panting, and her carroty hair hung all lop-sided and Ticky-wicky had already earned three more bouts of soap and water. They skidded out onto a corridor and Cullen started down it at full speed. He found a door shut, opened it with his foot, crowded into a dark space that held back echoes with a flat emptiness.

'We seem to have shaken them,' he said. 'Now, Pansy, before we go on.' He spoke severely. 'You and I are going to have a little chat.'

She rolled her eyes at him, coyly. 'Oh, yes, please!' she said, all panting maidenly eagerness. 'I'll like that!'

After Cullen had fought her off and persuaded her he really wanted to talk, she spoke in an offended tone.

'I'm representing the Maidens of Mercy. We have clinics and hospitals on better than five hundred worlds where aliens need our help. You'd be surprised at some of the primitive conditions we—'

'Yes. You're doing a great job. But what's on Arbinyeh that's pulling all the rank and the money? I guess at the mechanics of what's been going on; I'm interested in the prize.'

'You mean you aren't after Doctor Rhume's process?' She giggled and, her hurt forgotten, stroked his hand. 'You mean you really are my hero, helping me because of chivalry?'

Cullen swallowed. 'No—I'm here to hire salvage equipment. But I see everyone else is after this Rhume process—'

'I know Pancreas Polliwer is bidding. And your friend Klang. And one or two others—'

Cullen chuckled. 'I knew old Klang was no hick planet farmer! Bugging the hotel manager, the way he handled himself—' He sobered. 'And the Arbinyeh top brass were rolling the customers and taking their cash—what a sweet

racket!'

'We really need that process, Mr. Cullen. If you'd seen some of my scaly friends—it doesn't matter what shape a person is to a friendship—' Here she gave him a rib-cracking hug. 'When the disease breaks out and the keratin sloughs away, when the collagens deposit to make sclerosis turn a being's scales into a boiling cess-pit of horror—no, Fletcher, wearing scales is not all easy.'

'I've been told that before. Scales bring problems.'

'If the stratum corneum breaks down, then bacteria and other vile parasites can break in. Other symptoms of the disease are when the panniculus carnosus is unable to move the scales, sclerosis sets in, the scales lock in a rigid yet brittle mass. To see my patients lying helpless—oh, yes, Fletcher, the Maidens of Mercy really need the help that Doctor Rhume's process can bring.'

'So what's in it for these other non-scaled beings?' He smiled lop-sidedly. 'Except for the obvious.'

She nodded. 'It is the obvious. Doctor Rhume was killed in an accident and the Arbinyeh authorities set the process up for auction. Anyone who owns it can sell it for a large sum to any of a hundred races with scales.'

'I should've thought it should be freely available throughout the galaxy.'

'That is what the Maidens of Mercy plan.'

'It's something like a cure for cancer—of that order of importance—'

'Yes. But with you at my side, my shining knight, I know we can overcome all obstacles—'

'And,' said Cullen, on a breath. 'That's why Maessa was with de Vitry! Zdrungans have scaly backs and tails!'

'Who?' said Pansy, beginning to pout her over-full lips and squirm nearer for a little more dilly-dallying.

Cullen scrambled up, putting his elbow into massive and soft upholstery, causing Pansy to giggle. He stood up. He hitched the two guns around.

'That'll have to wait, Pansy. Now I know what's going on I want to meet up with a mechanical hayseed pal of mine!'

From the shadowed porticoed entrance Fletcher Cullen watched the auction. At his side Pansy breathed in gulping breaths she tried to hush. An Arbinyeh guard lay to one side, his snappers limp, dreaming of alien paradises.

The plastic-vaulted hall had been arranged for the auction. At a high pulpit an aged Arbinyeh wearing a toga-like garment of golden-glitter synthisilk wielded an auctioneer's hammer and leered over the assembly. A group of guards waited to his front and below the pulpit. Seated in a semicircle the watching would-be customers regarded the auctioneer and the despatch case guarded by gun-wearing Arbinyeh police. Their varied facial expressions, culled from half-a-dozen variegated worlds, would have repaid the brush of a Rembrandt.

'I am bid one million five,' the auctioneer said with a lubricious avarice. 'And fifty. Yes?' He looked at a spot at the back of the hall, over the heads of the bidders. He nodded as though receiving a signal. 'And one hundred.' He took the chela signal from the alien on the extreme left, added a hundred, to be immediately upped by another flick of a tentacle from the Orfrogian sitting at de Vitry's left side. Maessa Makrul sat at de Vitry's shoulder. She looked tense and expectant. In all the hall there were no signs of de Vitry's private army.

'At one million one hundred thousand—at two, at three, four, five—' The bidding brisked along. There seemed no auction rules about amounts to be bid, ratio-wise, and the sums bid leaped erratically.

'That's Pancreas Polliver,' whispered Pansy, indicating the portly alien with bright brown fur and a black muzzle, sitting negligently in his chair and bidding by flapping his tail. 'If he gets the process my hospitals never will!'

'I just wonder how many they hit with the green hobgoblin taxi,' Cullen grunted. 'Any ready cash is already in the Arbinyehs' pockets. It'll be galactic credit bidding now.' 'I had been authorised to go to ten millions—'

'Whew!' said Cullen, with respect.

They watched as the bidding shot past the two million mark, slowed, spurted, crept past the three and then, in quarter million increments, soared past the five and six millions mark. Two aliens rose, looking murderous, and left the hall, to be followed when the bidding topped the eight millions point by three more.

Pancreas Polliver and de Vitry, left to battle it out alone, exchanged blank professional looks. Maessa whispered something and de Vitry shook his head.

'Eight and three quarter millions,' the auctioneer said. He repeated the amount, looking directly at Pancreas Polliver. 'It is against you, sir.'

Polliver fluffed his muzzle, brushing a six-fingered clawed hand down his fur. Then he wagged his tail.

'Nine millions!' The auctioneer looked as though he'd opened the gates of wonderland. 'At nine millions.' He lifted the hammer. De Vitry shifted in his chair.

Maessa whispered something, vigorously. De Vitry's face took on the look of boiled beetroot. He lifted his left wrist where a transceiver gleamed.

'At nine millions,' the auctioneer repeated. Then, to

de Vitry: 'It is against you, sir.'

De Vitry spoke rapidly into the wrist mike.

Pancreas Polliver let a bleak smile ooze across his furred face.

Fletcher Cullen stepped forward into the light, and said: 'Nine and a quarter.'

Pansy squeaked in astonishment.

Pancreas Polliver reared up, barking in anger.

'That tops me!'

The doors burst open and de Vitry's private army swarmed in, their eight limbs flashing, and a running fight started up at once with the Arbinyeh guards. Gunfire flickered and criss-crossed in the hall. Sections of the plastic vaulting fell in. Dust puffed. Flames licked.

The auctioneer squealed and dived for a rear door.

De Vitry started off for the despatch case, producing a small weapon from his pocket and blasting the guards. His men battled away, keeping the ring. Maessa, her scales gleaming like golden sovereigns in the light, scrambled after de Vitry.

In the confusion and noise de Vitry grabbed the case and raced for the main doors, Maessa on his heels. Cullen glanced up. The whole ceiling bulged as fire licked at plastic supports.

'Come on, Pansy! The whole roof's coming in!'

They raced through the smoke. Cullen slammed a gun barrel against a snapper-armed jaw. They burst through moment before the vaulting collapsed. In a roaring smother of crashing masonry and steel beams, the plastic vaulting broke up. The whole building caved in.

Out on the steps the fresh air whipped at them. The stars paled as dawn broke ruddily all along the horizon, sending green streamers ahead to light the scene in a limpid shadowless bowl of radiance.



'He's heading for his flier, Pansy!' Cullen rapped. 'We've caught him now!'

They pounded across the grass after de Vitry and the Zdrungan girl.

De Vitry reached the entrance port to the flier, started up.

A shape moved at the port.

With a sharp cry, de Vitry staggered back. He flung his left hand up in panic.

Pounding up, Cullen took off in a shallow dive that cut de Vitry's legs from under him. Both men fell onto the grass and rolled. Maessa screamed and vanished under the hull. Pansy stood looking on, shouting encouragement to Cullen. Its anatomical exhortations were embarrassingly explicit.

Cullen sliced a fist across de Vitry's bearded jaw and wrenched the despatch case away. He put a foot on de Vitry's neck and stood up on the other foot, pressing hard.

De Vitry choked a monosyllabic snap.

'My hero!' cooed Pansy, advancing with arms outstretched.

'I told you, Fletch, ol' buddy!' came a gurgling sump-oil voice from the flier's port. 'You're lucky to have found such a wonderful girl!'

Cullen stared up. Klang stood there on his four legs, his dustbin body angled out, regarding the scene through his large luminous eye. His dangerous array of assorted limbs remained within his carapace.

'Hi, farmer,' said Cullen. 'I knew they wouldn't keep you down.'

'You got the process, then?'

'So it seems, Klang, old sport.'

'It seems, I might add, ol' buddy, we could do a spot of business. How much did it go for?'

'Enough. Y'know, Klang, if I'd thought you were really a farmer I'd have sworn off eating—'

Klang's sump-oil gurgle indicated amusement.

'And if I'd thought you wanted to hire salvage equipment! Well, ol' buddy. Don't hang around. Step aboard and let's be off.'

Cullen kicked de Vitry and let him lie. Pansy ran up into the ship. At the entry, Cullen looked about for Maessa. He could not see her in the brightening day. He took out the Stonham-Argus.

Klang said: 'What—? ol' buddy, Fletch? What?'

Cullen said: 'You're a good sort, Klang. Like the others, you're a galactic entrepreneur, picking up what you can and selling it to the highest bidder, and you don't worry overmuch about the ethics of the business.'

'So? Isn't that what you are? What we all are?' Sure, I make a good living in the galaxy. I've been called a soldier of fortune, among other things. I can cut you in for a good slice in the Doc Rhume Process, Fletch, ol' buddy. Your contacts may be good; but mine are the best—'

'This process is devised to save the lives of scaled folk suffering from horrible diseases. It can help billions of intelligent beings. It's not an article for sale or purchase.'

'Aw—come on!'

'Pansy here is from the Maidens of Mercy—'

'That bunch of do-gooders! Oh, come on, Fletch, ol' buddy! Don't let your Boy Scout instincts ruin a good deal! This is worth billions, let alone millions.'

'And it goes out to the scaley people for free.'

Klang began to open his carapace and Cullen moved the Stonham-Argus. The slit in the carapace disappeared.

'I've enjoyed meeting you, Klang, old sport. But if you'll kindly step down, Pansy and I will take off.'

'Now wait a minute! You can't leave me with all these Arbinyeh yokels running about foaming at the mouth!'

'If anyone can take care of himself, that's you, Klang, Move!'

Outside on the grass Klang angled up his eye.

'When I scuppered the guards and beat it here I figured de Vitry to come out on top. I waited for him. But I never figured you to louse up the deal, Fletch. We are buddies, aren't we? We'd make a great team—we could take the galaxy and hold it for ransom!'

'You make it sound very attractive, Klang, old sport. But, regretfully, the answer must be no. I'm a simple galactic bum, a loungeur, not even so grand as a soldier of fortune. I scrape a living as I can.' He eyed the dustbin calmly. 'But if I had to join up with anyone, I guess you'd qualify with flying colours, Klang, ol' buddy.'

Klang gurgled sump oil sounds. 'I misjudged you, ol' alien's galaxy.' Light from the burning building caught in his luminous eye. 'No hard feelings?'

buddy. Still, I'll make out. There are a million deals in this 'No hard feelings.' Cullen chuckled. 'I feel I've gained a friend. I look forward to our next meeting.'

The noise of angry Arbinyeh and assorted aliens grew louder. Dark gesticulating figures began to swarm from the debris. Guards and soldiers set about hunting up the next item on the agenda. Klang gurgled unhappily. He retracted his legs.

'I'll have to roll,' he said in that rusty echoing voice. 'And you've no idea how that scrambles my innards.'

'Roll on, Klang, old sport. Until the next time!'

And Cullen clanged the port in felicitous farewell and headed for the control cabin.

Pansy waited for him with a huge smile and passionately heaving bosoms. Cullen checked. He almost turned about and hared off back to Klang and the enraged Arbinyeh.

'De Vitry and Maessa will make it clear,' he said, darkly. 'That sort always do.'

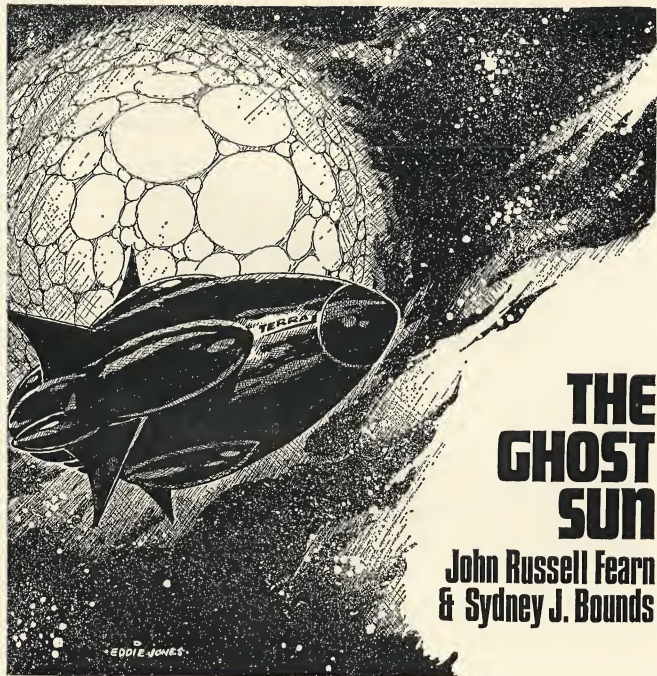
He dodged vast hands and cringed into the pilot's seat. He set up a quick take-off pattern on the panel. The ship quivered and moved. 'My hero!' Pansy gushed.

'Here, Pansy!' he roared. He hefted the despatch case at her. She immediately let go his shoulders, opened the case, began oohing and aahing over the blueprints and computer print outs and collapsible triagrams. Cullen let out a sigh of relief.

'Let that keep you busy, you passionate princess, you. It'll cost you nine and a quarter millions, less what they rolled you for. And,' he added darkly, 'I hope and pray it keeps your hands off me!'

The ship took off in a single controlled burst of power.

Somewhere below in the growing light Klang rolled bumpily to safety.



THE GHOST SUN

John Russell Fearn
& Sydney J. Bounds

The spaceship, a gigantic ovoid of suprametal, the product of high intelligence, pursued its tireless course through infinity, far beyond the Earthly galaxy.

Within it were six remarkable beings, remarkable both in appearance and mentality. An Earthman would have considered them insectile, with their beetle-like bodies, delicate tentacles and single unblinking eye fixed in the centre of their heads . . . strange beings, fantastic even, but possessed of intelligence superceding anything ever approached on Earth in its entire history.

These six voyagers, Elders of the Tormah, held in sacred trust the entire germ plasm of their race; fleeing before a nova that threatened their home planet, they had covered light-years in their search for sanctuary.

Ahead of them hung the Ghost Sun, so large as to be incredible, so faint that its light scarcely reached them. A unique phenomenon! As they sped towards it, the Tormah

were thrown into a state of great excitement as they saw, at no great distance, another ship—far smaller than their own but none the less space-worthy.

'Intelligence!' breathed the Master in a reed-like tone from an imperceptible orifice on his scaly back. 'Intelligence! The meeting of two worlds! Perhaps they—'

He stopped abruptly, his single eye fixed to a lensed window. In a moment the Elders gathered about him.

'Strange,' he went on, more slowly. 'It seems to change even as I look at it. What does this change mean? We must determine this immediately.'

Mathon, his deputy, fluted: 'Observe that the ship comes from the direction of the Ghost Sun.'

The Master's tentacles sought the controls, rapidly slowed the vessel. The great lock opened. Impervious to both absence of air and interstellar cold, the Tormah waited until their machine matched speed with the unknown ship. The silvered word—TERRA—inscribed on

the machine's scarred hull conveyed nothing to them.

The Master's tentacles came up, holding a blunt lensed object not unlike a torch. Under the searing ray that sprang from it, the outer airlock melted into vapor.

'Strange beings,' he muttered, leaping the gap from his own ship to the alien. 'They have double airlocks—we must be careful not to harm them. Mathon, reseal the gap.'

Mathon drew from the glittering belt about his insectile body another instrument, moved it rapidly across the gaping hole. And everywhere the new ray touched were streaks of sealing matter. At last, the opening was resealed by the creation of suprametal out of pure space. That a feat beyond the comprehension of any Earthly mind had been accomplished was of no concern to the Tormah. To them it was a simple matter.

Satisfied that none of the strange atmosphere within the ship could escape, the Master vaporised the inner airlock door; then the Tormah adjusted their strange bodies to the sudden rush of oxygenated air that engulfed them. A mental effort closed all the external pores on their scaly forms, effectually proofing them against the absorption of the new gas. Quietly they stepped forward to gaze upon a scene that puzzled even their advanced minds.

One man sat alone at the control desk. Man? Skeleton rather, for only a grinning skull was visible under the transparent helmet of his spacesuit. Before him lay a thick wad of paper, held together by a primitive spiral of wire. There was writing on the paper and a writing instrument clutched in the dead man's hand.

'He possessed *two* eyes,' Mathon marvelled.

The Master's gaze travelled about the control room. 'One man alone,' he said in amazement. 'It is incredible, and yet—'

He stopped, snatched up the wad of paper in his tentacle. 'Record this! I detect further changes still going on aboard this strange derelict.'

Immediately, Mathon took the paper, held it before a small cylindrical instrument selected from the equipment on his heavy belt; then handed it back. The recording took only a fraction of a second.

The Master took the paper mechanically; his solitary eye was fixed on the strange being they had found. New inexplicable emotions passed through him as he beheld the man from Terra—if that was his home—mysteriously start to fade from view. Slowly... slowly... then the spacesuit was empty.

Nor was that all of the amazing changes aboard that ship. The wad of paper faded in his tentacle and vanished too. The walls of the ship vaporised until space showed where they had been.

Before the Tormah had the chance to move, the entire ship, solid as it had first appeared, vanished from about them. Only their own suprametal seal was left. They floated in empty space and immediately made their way back to their own vessel.

'Very strange,' the Master fluted thoughtfully when they gathered once more in the control room. 'You have the recording of that peculiar cipher the being wrote down?'

Mathon inclined a tentacle in assent. 'Every cipher, Master, word for word, from the first page to the last. It only awaits reproduction after our translator-machine has studied the meanings of the words and transformed them into our own language.'

'Proceed,' the Master requested, and watched while the tiny plastic cylinder was removed from its casing and

placed in a machine of tremendous mathematical complexity.

Here, for many hours of Earthly time, the manuscript was examined, checked word against word, reproduced; until at last the translator gave forth, in the language of the Tormah, the story of the vanishing man and ship they had unexpectedly found.

In complete silence, in growing amazement, the Tormah listened.

'My name is Adam Brett and I come from Earth. I know that I am dying and this, my last statement, is intended as a warning to whoever might find me—unlikely as that seems. I say, avoid the Ghost Sun!

'From the moment that my experimental ship was engulfed in the electro-magnetic vortex, I knew I had little chance. Succeeding events confirmed that I am lost beyond all hope of return.

'Swept up by mighty forces, I was hurled across the intergalactic void, seemingly in but a moment of time. The stars appeared to rush together, coalesce in blazing fury; space itself seemed aflame with the light of a million suns. I rushed on, and on, headlong...

'Finally, when I came out of the vortex and saw no familiar star or constellation, I knew that I was indeed in another galaxy. And then I saw the Ghost Sun! A mirage I thought—mistakenly—at first. So huge it dominated the sky, so faint as to appear no threat to life. I should have turned back, but I was curious. Nothing like it had ever been seen in the skies of Earth.

'It is too late now. The damage to my body cells is irreversible. My instruments tell me the Ghost Sun is real—but not in any sense I would have understood before. Possibly the greatest scientific discovery of all time... wasted because I can tell no-one.

'The elements that burn deep in the heart of the Ghost Sun are not normal—they are composed of anti-matter! And the radiation it emits is in the form of anti-particles, fatal to any normal life. Already I feel the strength draining from my body... I must write it all down, ensure this testimony survives me, leave a warning... avoid the Ghost Sun!'

The Master waved a tentacle gently as the recording ended. 'Turn back, Mathon. Let us leave this place of doom.'

The great ovoid turned through an arc, accelerated away from the peril of the Ghost Sun.

'So, all unwittingly, despite our great intelligence, we would have rushed headlong to our deaths. And with us, the entire germ plasm of our race! The Master fluted, musing. 'Only this lost spacefarer has saved us—and now he is gone, utterly vanished into a void beyond our understanding. So far he travelled that we cannot even let his own people know of the great service he performed for us. It is very sad.'

The Master roused himself. 'But he shall not be forgotten! We shall create a memorial to him.'

'Yes, yes,' chanted the Tormah, excited. 'He shall have a memorial.'

And so it came to pass, in the days after a suitable planet had been seeded, that a massive satellite was constructed and placed in orbit around the Ghost Sun. Forever circling, forever broadcasting a warning to any who might venture that way—a warning to the living from a dead representative of an unknown race inhabiting a galaxy far across space and time.

The Impatient Dreamers

WALTER GILLINGS

In this latest instalment of his popular series recalling the earlier days of British sf, our well-known contributor reveals a closely-kept secret concerning H. G. Wells and his reaction to the work of John Russell Fearn, whom an American fan magazine christened 'Wells II of England.' Then there was that other English writer whose novel the Master happened to pick up

8. The Way of the Prophet

If there was one thing on which the sf fans of the 1930-40 'golden days' fed their egos, it was their encyclopaedic knowledge of the field. The walking bibliography who had studied the magazines so diligently that he could spell out such names as Abner J. Gelula or Henrik Dahl Juve without faltering, recount the tales of G. Peyton Wertebaker in date order, or reveal the identity of the noted mathematician who hid behind the pseudonym John Taine, was someone to be envied if not admired. By 1937, having constantly thumbed the issues of eleven years, I was pretty well genned up myself. So, in *Scientifiction—The British Fantasy Review*, which I had managed to keep going for five issues, I took a leaf from the book of America's Science Fiction League and invited my 100-odd subscribers to 'Test Your Knowledge of Fantasy.' No prizes offered, and no diplomas . . .

Those thirty questions, now, look ridiculously simple. At least, my memory is still good enough to enable me to pass my own test, set thirty-three years ago, with flying colours. If I had to tackle one based on the output of the past eleven years, my flag would need a wire support to cope with the vacuum. But how many would get top marks, bearing in mind the immensely greater output of material to be absorbed, including books and paperbacks? In 1937, the first bibliography of British fantasy, compiled by the Science Fiction Association, listed no more than 200 volumes, most of which were decidedly musty. My own collection amounted to fewer than sixty titles . . . but my solitary bookcase was beginning to fill up.

Capek's *War With The Newts*, Stapledon's *Star Maker*, Shiel's *The Young Men Are Coming* . . . Even the Master, Wells, had returned to the fold with *Star-Begotten*, the theme of which fandom considered, presumptuously, as applicable to themselves or, hopefully, to their offspring. And both *Scientifiction* and the *Daily Mirror*, let alone the *Southern Daily Echo*, got a good story when Wells wrote to Festus Pragnell praising his *Green Man of Kilsnona*, which had been serialised two years earlier in the waning *Wonder Stories*. The book has been out here well over a

year, and sold no more than 800 copies, when Wells' letter reached the Southampton author, saying:

Dear Mr. Pragnell,—I wanted something to read last night, and I found your book on a table in my study. I think it's a very good story indeed of the fantastic-scientific type, and I was much amused and pleased to find myself figuring in it.

The letter was signed 'H. Geewells', the name of a writer on Pragnell's electron world who had authored 'War From The Clouds'. But the unsolicited testimonial came too late to help the sales of *Green Man*, whose publishers had made a brave attempt to sell hard-cover books at half-a-crown—and been obliged to shut up shop. Pragnell, a 33-year-old clerk writing in his spare time, fortified by a daily dose of baker's yeast, had become disenchanted with sf and turned to adventure stories. Said he: 'I simply can't adapt myself to so many different editorial policies. I'm not a mental chameleon—which probably means I am finished with magazine science fiction for ever.'

Not so John Russell Fearn, who also got a letter from the Master, in rather different terms. Dubbed 'Wells II of England' by America's *Fantasy Magazine*, the Blackpool writer thought it expedient to acquaint Wells I with his work, which had made such an impact in *Astounding Stories* under Editor F. Orlin Tremaine. He also tried to enlist the Master's help in promoting British sf. But the little giant must have been in one of his irascible moods. His reply, which Fearn showed me, unabashed, read:

My dear Sir,—I return the stories you have sent me to read. I think your American admirers do us both an injustice in calling you H. G. Wells II. I shall be glad if you will do your best to repudiate that title. Our work is entirely dissimilar in style and mental approach. There is one glory of the sun and one of the moon, and so I hope you will not be offended by my insisting upon our profound dissimilarity.

I don't think English people are 'unscientific'. The success of Jeans, Whitehead, Julian Huxley, Heard, Dunne, witnesses to a wide interest in science, but our

public criticises what it reads in a rather different spirit from the American. It is much more sceptical.

Very sincerely, H. G. WELLS.

It's kind of you to suggest sending me 'The Power Supreme', but I am very much worked at present and I find myself overwhelmed by the reading I *must* do.

Obviously, this letter did not make headlines—not even in *Scientificfiction*, where I would dearly have loved to use it. But Fearn had his sensibilities, and Wells would hardly have approved. This is, in fact, the first time the exchange has been recorded; and I feel that Fearn would endorse its inclusion in these annals thirty-five years after the event. What makes the polite rebuff so piquant today is that the results of our much-vaunted 'scepticism' towards new ideas—except, perhaps, when we are at war with a Churchill in the saddle—have driven many of our scientists to America, where science writer Gerald (now H. F.) Heard went years ago. And, did Wells but know it, it was the works of those same scientists he mentioned, plus Eddington and others, that Fearn was poring over in the public library to give credence to his fantastic story-ideas, which often derived from these sources.

As every sf fan who revered him knows, Wells had the advantage of a scientific training as well as a talent for writing and a creative imagination amounting to genius. And he was equally insistent that his work had nothing in common with Verne's, which was mostly inspired by other people's ideas and actual inventions. Paradoxically for us, Wells did not regard his stories, which we consider the bed-rock of modern sf, as 'scientific': to the great prognosticator they were simply fantasies or romances. Perhaps, after all, John Wyndham was justified in his constant objection that science fiction had been misnamed, though he would not admit the term 'science-fantasy' was any better.

Even more difficult to comprehend is that Wells, the 'inventor' of *Cavorite*, evidently did not believe in the prospect of space-travel—at least by the rocket method—and repulsed the approaches of the British Interplanetary Society to which 'GBS' and Stapledon—not to mention Yvonne de Carlo—responded. The ridiculous Space Gun in *Things To Come* was supposed to have been for the sake of cinematic effect; yet as much could have been achieved by a model rocket-vessel such as Oberth had designed for *The Girl In The Moon*. I could hardly blame the lay critic who passed me on his way to the exit, muttering, 'What a lotta bloody nonsense!' It proved Wells' point, evidencing a wide interest in science tinged with typical English scepticism.

But few could have incensed the Master so much as his American namesake Orson Welles and scriptwriter Howard Koch, whose updated radio version of *The War Of The Worlds* caused a universal sensation in October 1938. The Sunday evening broadcast by Welles' Mercury Theatre players was so realistic that several thousand horrified listeners left their homes and fled for their lives, despite repeated assurances that it was only a radio play. 'An outrage', our Mr. Wells called it; while the American Press pilloried Orson—then a precocious genius of twenty-three—for starting a 'tidal wave of terror that swept the nation from coast to coast.'

Of six million people who heard the broadcast—or a part of it—at least a million were 'frightened or disturbed,' according to a team of trained investigators sent out by New Jersey's Princeton University to determine the real



This almost forgotten novel by Wells told of the mutation of human life by an engineered exposure to cosmic radiation from space

causes of the panic. Their findings were the basis of a fascinating study by social psychologist Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion From Mars* (1940), which I would consider required reading for any student of sf doing a comprehensive thesis on the *genre*. This 'study in the psychology of panic' also carried the complete script of the notorious broadcast which was later reprinted in several anthologies—including a softcover selection by Welles himself titled *Invasion From Mars* (Dell, 1949).

In England we were more concerned over a menace from much closer regions, the war clouds having loomed large only a few weeks before, as Hitler made his claims on Czechoslovakia. But it was not difficult for British sf fans to appreciate our more credulous American cousins actually believing in a Martian invasion. We knew the influence exerted by *Buck Rogers* and his compatriot *Flash Gordon*, whose interplanetary exploits had been screened in cinemas on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, the Princeton investigators found that 'some people had built up such fanciful notions of the possibilities of science that they could easily believe the powers of strange super-scientists were being turned against them!'

However, the consensus of opinion among the 250-odd experts who weighed the various factors contributing to the hysteria laid the heaviest blame on the war scare in Europe and 'general intellectual immaturity', and put 'reading of *Buck Rogers*, etc.' only slightly higher in the scale than 'religious beliefs', the least powerful influence.

In fact, familiarity with sf, at least among the adult population, seemed to have restricted rather than enlarged the degree of misapprehension. Tending to underline the comment of *Astounding* editor John W. Campbell that if the incident signified anything at all it was, perhaps, 'a need for wider appreciation of science fiction.'

Which is precisely what resulted from it, if author L. Sprague de Camp's *Science Fiction Handbook* (1953) is any guide:

For science fiction... the event was a boost. Many who had never read Wells' stories hunted them up, and others tried the magazines with the bug-eyed monster covers... Within the next eight months seven more sf magazines were launched....

If our minds had not been occupied with more vital matters—gas masks and air raid shelters, ration cards and call-up papers, Dunkirk and 'Lord Haw-Haw'—it might have been galling to reflect that the war, which nipped British sf in the bud, caused it to flourish in the U.S.A. like the proverbial Venusian jungle. The magazines proliferated to an extent that made it almost impossible to find a title for the latest publication when, by early 1941, they numbered almost twenty. Over twelve months in 1942-43, when an emaciated *Tales of Wonder* finally went under, more than a hundred separate issues emerged on the other side of the Atlantic, averaging some 1,300 pages a month.

By 1944, paper economy had taken a heavy toll, leaving only one monthly, one bi-monthly, and seven quarterlies to produce a mere forty-six issues in a year. But it was only a temporary setback—the war could not last for ever. In an article on 'The Fantasy Field' in *The Writer*, reprinted from America's *Writer's Digest*, John Russell Fearn ventured to indulge in some typically optimistic prophesying—under his 'secret' pen-name of Thornton Ayre, with which he had built a new reputation in *Amazing Stories*:

War has curtailed a lot of these publications... but in another sense war has mercilessly educated the great reading public to the power and possibilities of science. When peace brings leisure and the time to read and think... scientific fiction will not be a hazy, half-understood literature, but an ever-growing interest one jump ahead of the marvels which will be bound to come in the post-war years.

That was written in 1943, before the V2s had started to demonstrate the potentialities of the rocket, while the atom bomb was something you read about in *Astounding*. But to quote de Camp:

... as soon as the war ended, this interrupted expansion of sf was resumed. The number of magazines again increased to well over twenty. More... publishers set up lines of imaginative novels. The fans resumed their conventions. And the slick-paper magazines, the movies, the radio and television devoted more and more attention to this kind of entertainment. Imaginative fiction underwent an expansion and a rise in public esteem much like that enjoyed by the detective story during and after World War I.

It didn't take long for this to happen in America, where the process of conversion had started even before the war. Here, it was a rather different story, which took longer in

unfolding. For the paper 'shortage'—actually a steadily dwindling quota applying only to existing publications, so creating a flourishing 'black market' press—continued much longer than even the most pessimistic expected. Thanks to the tedium of the blackout and firewatch duty, anything readable would sell if you could get it on the bookstalls. But it wasn't until the uneasy peace had been with us for sixteen months that we were able to produce anything worthwhile in the way of sf... and then it didn't last.

The promised resumption of *Tales of Wonder* failed to materialise, so that I was forced to seek another publisher. I still cast envious eyes at Odhams, who had acquired *Armchair Science*—previously edited by Professor Low, whom I had seen performing his parlour tricks for the troops while still in uniform. But even *Modern Wonder*, which had been firmly established when the first sirens sounded, had suffered the effects of the wholesale evacuation of its school-age readership, problems of distribution, and other setbacks which gradually throttled the life out of many publications. In an attempt to capture a more adult following, it had switched its title to *Modern World* while changing its format to war economy size. Still it could not escape extinction, though it had a good run for its money, and can still fetch a fair price as a collector's item.

Originally a twopenny weekly dealing with mechanical invention and scientific achievement while making a feature of science fiction, *Modern Wonder* hit the bookstalls with a bang only six weeks before *Tales of Wonder* fired its experimental 'one-shot' issue in 1937. In some ways reminiscent of the ill-fated *Scoops*, it was still a very different cup of cocoa. Produced in photogravure in the best Odhams style, with front and back covers and middle pages in full colour, it featured such current marvels as the 200-inch telescope at Mount Palomar, the Mersey Tunnel, the Channel rail ferry, and the latest record-breaking cars, locos and airplanes.

It had all been done before, of course, in my own school-days—by *The Mechanical Age*, a sober but forward-looking paper which at first carried the somewhat misleading title, *The Mechanical Boy*. Except that in 1925 the idea of spaceships exploring the solar system had not even occurred to the authors of a series of articles anticipating the marvels of the year 2000; whereas *Modern Wonder* ran a series entitled 'Chronicles Of A Space Voyager.' By whom? None other than our ubiquitous friend John Russell Fearn, who was on to it like a moonshot no sooner had I informed him of the imminent appearance of the paper, which later published at least three of his short stories.

Obviously taking its cue from Hugo Gernsback's Science Fiction League—which *Thrilling Wonder Stories* kept going in half-hearted fashion until 1945, when it finally petered out—*Modern Wonder* initiated a League of Science with the object of encouraging its more devoted readers towards a scientific career. 'Someone among you', it assured them, 'is a Marconi, a Malcolm Campbell, an Edison, a Henry Ford. You are the future builders of great scientific and mechanical marvels...' It would be interesting to know, now that those youngsters must be in their prime (or past it), how far these high hopes proved justified.

At the same time, as in the case of *Scoops*, the editor, a young science graduate named H. T. Cauldwell who was glad to grant me an interview, insisted that grown men were taking an interest in the paper. At least it was mature enough in its general tone to re-run John Beynon's *Passing*

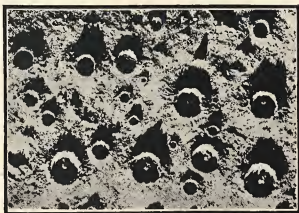
THE CHRONICLES OF
A SPACE VOYAGER:
No. 1



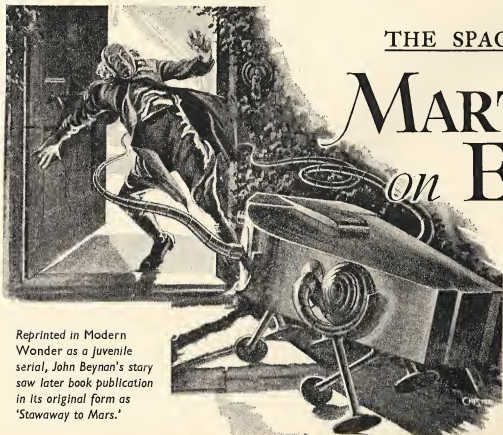
THE DEAD WORLD

JOHN RUSSELL FEARN takes you to the moon, where mighty mountain ranges stretch stark fingers to the stars, vast craters pit the arid earth, and all life is extinct

(Right) Some of the thousands of the craters of extinct volcanoes as they appear through a powerful telescope.



'The Chronicles Of A Space Voyager' which ran in Modern Wonder in 1937 described a fictional trip around the solar system, but the details of the other planets were surprisingly accurate, being firmly based on current scientific knowledge.



THE SPACE MACHINE

MARTIANS *on* EARTH

by
**John
BEYNON**

Reprinted in Modern Wonder as a juvenile serial, John Beynon's story saw later book publication in its original form as 'Stawaway to Mars.'



'Death At The Observatory' was the most notable of three specially-commissioned stories by J. R. Fearn which appeared through October and November 1938 in *Modern Wonder*. It was twice reprinted in American magazines, in *Captain Future* (1940) and *Fantastic Story* (1950). The idea of the story was subsequently incorporated in Fearn's novel *The Lonely Astronomer* (1954).

Show serial, 'Stowaway To Mars', in an abridged version titled 'The Space Machine'. For this the same Chester illustrations were used, retouched where necessary to allow for the fact that Joan, the stowaway of the original tale, had changed sex in the interval and was now called John. The phenomenon is the first fictional case on record, as far as my knowledge goes.

The serial was followed by another co-authored by Ralph Stranger, the radio engineer who made an appearance (complete with monocle) in *Wonder Stories* in 1932, and who later launched a popular science monthly that faded all too soon. A piece of true science fiction of the sort that Gernsback would have approved, the story concerned a giant atomic submarine on an Antarctic mission which led to the discovery of 'The Lost Kingdom', where Roman emperors still ruled; and it embodied a lesson in the principles of radio, replete with diagrams.

Perhaps *Modern Wonder's* most popular contributor was W. J. Passingham, who authored the serials 'Atlantis Returns' and 'The World Behind The Moon.' He was also kept busy by editor W. A. Williamson of *Passing Show*, which continued to favour sf so long as it had the ingredients he deemed essential. Anything resembling the current American product was definitely out... and Passingham, a freelance writer living in North London, worked exclusively for Odhams. As a result, he probably enjoyed the highest payment of any periodical contributor this side of the Atlantic, and had no cause to contemplate the American market.

After obliging with 'The Broadcast Murders', a spy thriller about a super-weapon that killed from afar, he made a bigger hit in *Passing Show* in 1937 with 'When

London Fell,' in which prehistoric monsters lurking in caverns beneath the capital found their way to the surface to terrorize citizens. 'World Without Time' followed in 1938; and in the Spring of 1939 the author himself emerged as a forceful personality at the third annual convention of the S.F.A. in London, where he handed out his recipe for success as a writer.

The following January, at his invitation, I took part in summit talks in an office off the Strand where a firm with the strange name of The World Says Ltd. was publishing a monthly digest called *Synopsis*. In fact, I found myself doing most of the talking, while an imperious gent named Alfred Leigh Augustine Walker-Greig listened critically. Someone more genial whom I knew well, and who was more involved with the project in hand, was also present. His name was Edward John Carnell, at whose suggestion I had been brought in.

The proposal was that the firm should take over the S.F.A. and start a magazine with the title *New Worlds*, which Carnell had used for the fanmag he edited for the Association until it suspended its activities for the duration. It fell to me to trot out estimates of probable editorial costs based on my experience of running *Tales of Wonder*, then in its ninth issue. The inference was that there would be editorial posts for both of us; though I did not relish the idea of working under the waspish Mr. Walker-Greig, for all that he claimed to be in close touch with Gernsback. Besides, I had been disillusioned before...

**In the next issue John Carnell himself tells the astonishing story of the magazine that never was—
NEW WORLDS!**

THE PLANET OF GREAT EXTREMES

By DAVID A. HARDY, F.R.A.S., A.F.B.I.S.

Writing an article about the planet Mercury a few years ago I would have said that it rotates on its axis in 88 days, the same time as it takes to go round the Sun, which means that it keeps one face permanently turned to the solar furnace and the other always away. Thus one side would always be intensely hot whilst the other would be frozen, but there would be a 'twilight zone' due to libration—a sort of wobbling motion in Mercury's rotation—in which space travellers could live quite comfortably. This zone was much beloved by science fiction writers, some of whom even populated it with various forms of life. Another favourite feature in SF was the pools or even seas of molten lead on Mercury.

In 1964 a huge bowl-shaped radio telescope built into a valley in the mountains of Puerto Rico measured the rotation of Mercury by means of radar echoes, and found that it rotates once in about 59 days, which explained why the temperature of the dark side had been found to be about 21°C instead of near absolute zero: the surface material does not have time to cool off properly before coming into fierce sunlight again.

No twilight zone then. What about the molten lead? This idea probably arose because the older Astronomy books were fond of quoting the temperature of the 'sunlit side' as about 415°C and saying that the metals, lead and tin, would be molten at that temperature. Where a liquid exists there is always vapour though, and if either of these metals ever appeared in a free form on Mercury then over the aeons the high temperatures combined with low gravity would long ago have dispersed their molecules into space.

Mercury has such a low gravity because it is so small; indeed it is the smallest planet in our Solar System, being only 3,030 miles in diameter. Two moons of Jupiter and one of Saturn are larger than this—indeed our own moon is not much smaller, and there is a theory that Mercury is not a true planet but a moon which somehow broke away from Venus and took up its own orbit around the Sun. Its orbit is quite eccentric, for it approaches as close as 28½ million miles from the Sun at perihelion and goes out to 43½ million miles at aphelion.

On average, the sun will appear about three times the size we see it from Earth, though of course it will be impossible to look directly at it. Equally, it will be impossible to see stars in the daytime sky because of the glare, and the solar corona and prominences and the swarm of cosmic dust known as the Zodiacal Light will only become visible with the use of suitable filters and equipment. My painting on this month's cover must therefore be taken as a sort of 'montage' in which all these features are visible in one view. The landscape is probably very similar to that of the Moon, but even

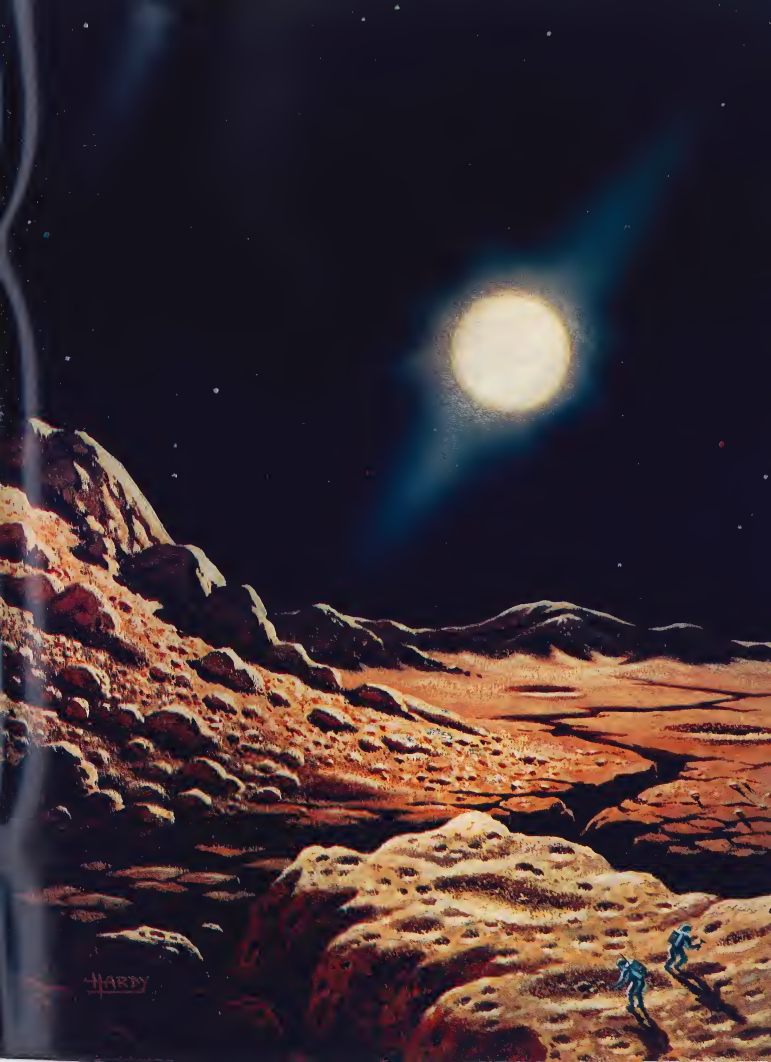
more cracked and barren. The same type of craters may exist, but the tall, jagged mountains—up to 12½ miles high according to some early observers!—have to be scaled down to rounded masses perhaps no more than 5 to 10,000 feet high, eroded by the extremes of temperature.

Mercury has no moon, and next to the Sun the planet Venus will be the brightest object in the sky, but even Earth will shine with twice the brilliance of Venus in our own sky. The sky will probably be black in the daytime: the question of whether or not Mercury has an atmosphere has not been finally settled, but it does seem possible that it has a very fine mantle of heavy gases, perhaps only 1/1,000th the density of Earth's. If this proves to be the case the sky would be such a deep violet as to appear virtually black, though whitish veils have been reported from time to time. If Mercury has an appreciable magnetic field, however, it is possible that spectacular auroral displays occur on the night hemisphere, in view of the proximity to the solar flares.

Mercury has been mapped, notably by observers such as Schiaparelli and Antoniadi, but in view of the fact that they could not even deduce the true rotation period from their observation of the planet's markings, perhaps not too much faith can be placed in these older maps. In any case, observation by Earth-based telescope is always difficult because it is always so close to the Sun, so that the surrounding sky is bright—and when the sky is dark Mercury is low down and seen through a greater thickness of our atmosphere... The best time to observe Mercury from Earth is during the very brief spell of a solar eclipse, for then the planet can be seen against a dark sky when it is high up. Such opportunities are of course much too rare, and the only way to get any useful information about the planet is by means of a space-probe.

The Space Division of the Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm Group has, under contract to ESRO, carried out and submitted a feasibility study for a fly-by of Mercury, and say that a start could be made in 1975. The probe would be known internationally as MESO, and would weigh about 400kg, of which 70kg would be scientific instruments for studying the planet's surface and atmosphere. Direct pictures would be taken by television camera, allowing reliable maps to be drawn up for the first time. Atlas-Centaur plus Burner II was taken as the basis for the launch vehicle. This project represents the first official sign of interest in interplanetary missions by ESRO.

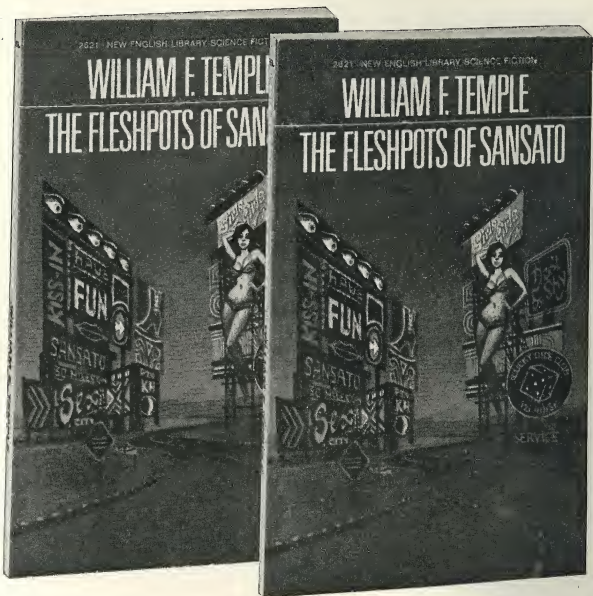
Mercury would undoubtedly make an ideal site for a permanent solar observatory, but it is so hostile that it will probably remain a world infrequently visited by men.



HARDY

THE FLESHPOTS OF SANSATO

A great new novel by William F. Temple



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K.W.EATON TRANSFERENCE

Lewis' first thought was, why doesn't he frighten me? He was huge, a great awkward lumbering creature as big as a Canadian grizzly, and he could conceivably be violent; but somehow he looked so helpless, as though for all his size he would crumple at a blow.

'Good morning,' he said into his side of the translation machine, 'My name is Dr. Matthew Lewis.'

A string of involved clicks and grunts came out of the other side. The creature opposite him replied in a deep, powerful voice.

'Good morning,' translated the machine tinnily. 'I am Teremen. What do you wish to do, Dr. Lewis?'

Lewis looked across the desk, bare save for the squat, gleaming shape of the machine. The Shuran shifted restlessly in his seat, which creaked protestingly under the massive weight. He seemed awkward and ill-at-ease. Even the clothes he wore did not somehow look right or fit well on him. Lewis looked at the alien's face, and the brown eyes stared back at him, but he could read no meaning into the expression on the great furred jowl. This was going to be difficult.

